Second Dawn

by Writerly

Summary

[SPOILERS FOR THE END OF THE GAME]
[POSSIBLE REFERENCES TO THE FROZEN WILDS DLC FROM CHAPTER 26 AND ONWARD]

- The woman is standing near the console, the same height as Aloy. Same color red hair, but shorter. Her face is different in that it looks older, with more pronounced smile lines. She looks tired. Worn. It's Elisabet in a way Aloy has never seen her before, without the holo's filter of blue light layered over her image. Real and tangible.

- Aloy helps restore GAIA. In return, GAIA decides to bring back Elisabet, and that's where things get messy.
1/8/2018: Back from HIATUS. <3

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

It's a slow burn, no romance (up until where I'm currently writing), many feels story! The end of Horizon: Zero Dawn left me aching for more Elisabet and more GAIA and more Aloy, so what the heck, I wrote a thing.

I've already written 22k of it and will be posting new chapters regularly.

Much love to my beloved beta and sounding board, who is always up for me ranting about characters and 'how do plot', burbear <3

EDIT 19/DEC/2017: I've definitively decided there won't be any romance for Aloy in this fic. I can't imagine where that would have to happen. c: Feel free to read it with shipper glasses though. <3

GAIA is still alive.

She's slowly rebuilding herself, restoring her code to what it used to be. She's been at it ever since GAIA Prime's destruction, using data from the storage clouds and by trying to establish contact with other facilities. Piecing herself together again. Refusing to be beaten.

Aloy knows. She's the one who came in and finally gave GAIA the data she needed to really begin reconstructing the system core. Only last week was GAIA finally able to show herself once more, although without a projected body. None of the Nora know because they are unwilling to enter deeper into the Cradle facility, even if they've been allowed by the matriarchs to pray inside the temple.

It's convenient.

Aloy knows it isn't subtle when she enters through the bunker door, but at least there's no one else around when it closes behind her.

Saving the world... It's too big an accomplishment, weighing down on her. She's forbidden everyone from kneeling or calling her ridiculous titles like 'Anointed' but it doesn't stop them from wanting to. She can see it in their eyes, in the way they move closer and seem to fold in on themselves, making their bodies smaller compared to hers.

There's a raw edge inside of her, like a rough shard, and she doesn't know how to smooth it out. It aches and yearns for feelings of warmth she has seldom experienced. She tries to hold on to the moments that sometimes soothe her. Recordings of GAIA and Elisabet.

Aloy has gathered materials inside one of the smaller rooms of the facility, things that give her... comfort. Small items like the translucent rocks she found in the Meridian bay, or the soft quilts given to her by the Banuk. Vala was right about comforts being more than distractions. Sometimes they're the only ties holding Aloy back from doing something she'd regret later.

Her thoughts have always been a little dark. More so of late. She keeps thinking how she should
have never been born. Everyone would be dead, but... it's not like she would be aware of it, able to
grieve the immense loss. Where the Nora believe in an afterlife, Aloy has nothing. They also still
believe GAIA is a goddess instead of a machine, something Aloy isn't actively trying to change.

“I would have wanted her to be... curious,” Aloy's Focus intones, carrying Elisabet's voice. “And
willful - unstoppable, even... but with enough compassion to... heal the world... just a little bit.”

“How will I know if I've done enough?” Aloy asks softly, huddled in one of her quilts on what
might have been a bed in a distant, long gone past.

The recording continues on its own. Aloy quickly rewinds to the beginning of the conversation,
skipping the end of the message. She wants them to keep talking. She closes her eyes and pretends
that they're with her, talking next to her, just like she used to pretend with the Happy Birthday Isaac
holo.

“And that's when my mother took my face in her hands and...”

“... spoke,” Aloy finishes in time with Elisabet's recorded voice. She shudders. What would that feel
like? A mother's hands on your face. There is so much Aloy would give to experience it, if only
once.

Without warning, Aloy remembers finding Elisabet. Seeing the Focus reconstruction of Elisabet's
face hovering over her protective helmet. Reaching out and feeling nothing but the hard surface
beneath the holo.

*It's not fair.*

The recordings make it feel like Elisabet is just out of reach, instead of long gone, and it hurts so
much.

“Aloy. May I speak outside of protocol?”

She startles, looking around before realizing GAIA is using the Focus to communicate with her. “Go
ahead, GAIA,” Aloy says after clearing her throat.

“Aloy, you have been showing signs of emotional distress. Query: Is there any way I can help?”

She isn't sure how a disembodied machine can help her, but she does wonder. Is this GAIA's
personality shining through, or a deep-seated tie to her maker? Whichever it is, Aloy is glad GAIA
no longer refers to her as Elisabet. She's not sure if she could bear it.

It does spark an idea.

“Do you have any more datapoints Elisabet left behind?”

“Negative,” GAIA answers almost immediately. “My current access to information is limited.
Attempts to retrieve datapoints will stall current reparations. Query: Do you wish me to change my
prime objective?”

“No, GAIA. You should take care of yourself first,” Aloy says. “But there are files?”

“Correction: There is a probability. Does this information bring you comfort?”

The idea that there might be more to know on Elisabet, maybe even hear her say more things – it
lights a small fire inside Aloy. Something to hope for. “Yeah, it does,” she says softly. “Thank you,
The answer seems to satisfy GAIA, as the AI lets the conversation rest at that point. Aloy keeps listening to Elisabet telling stories to GAIA.

“... my mother took my face in her hands ...” the Focus repeats.

Aloy can't stop the dry sobs that make her body shake and quiver. Grieving someone she never had the chance to know.

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Time passes. Unable to stay completely still for long, Aloy has taken to visiting different facilities, searching for ways to help GAIA. A small drive here, some files there. Even if Aloy has a hard time understanding what these things are, she's more than willing to do anything for even the smallest chance of helping the AI.

With aching feet Aloy returns to the only place that comes close to a home, ignoring the people she walks past on her way to the temple. So close to her goal, there's only one person she'll talk to.

Teersa is overjoyed to see Aloy, as always. “Have you found the tools the All-Mother asked for?” she asks, a curious spark in her eyes. The other matriarchs keep their distance most of the time, but Teersa is welcoming.

“I found something,” Aloy says, nudging her satchel. There's no way of knowing for certain that it'll be useful.

“Blessed Aloy,” Teersa says in awe. “You truly are a servant of the Goddess.”

Yeah, yeah, Aloy thinks, stepping up to the bunker door.

“Hold for identiscan.”

Everyone in the room seems to be holding their breath for the door to open. She catches the beginnings of excited murmurs just as the door closes behind her. Her shoulders sag. Alone at last.

First order of business. She heads down to the control room and plugs in the new data. The lights on the panels spring to life as GAIA takes over. Holo projections show figures and numbers Aloy doesn't understand, but so far it looks... good.

“It's the ah, ELEUTHIA core,” Aloy says to the empty space. She's not sure that's what it's actually called, but hopefully GAIA will know what she means. “Can you work with it?”


Aloy slouches down against the wall, taking a moment to catch her breath. “Is something wrong?” she asks.

“Negative. I wish to express feelings of gratitude towards you. The odds stand in our favor once more.”

“Not much else I could do, was there, GAIA? Isn't this what you made me for?” The words come out in a harsh manner. She almost apologizes.

“You have always had a choice, Aloy. In you, all things are possible.”
And just like that, Aloy's throat closes up.

*I believe in you, Elisabet. In you, all things...* 

“I'm not her, GAIA,” Aloy manages to say in a rough voice.

“I am aware. You are Aloy. Nonetheless, it applies to you, as well.”

How is it that a machine can sound so much kinder than most humans? Aloy takes a moment to try and collect herself. “Thank you, GAIA,” she says in a soft, small voice, wiping away the beads of moisture gathered at the edges of her eyes. More vulnerable that she ever lets herself be, outside.

“Query: I may be in need of assistance. Are you currently available?”

Aloy blinks hard, getting rid of the soft feelings. “Yeah, of course, how can I help?”

GAIA projects a holo of one of the facility's lower floors. A blinking light indicates a service door of some sort. “I am unable to gain access. Scans indicate a blockade of unidentified material.”

“Want me to check it out for you?”

“Affirmative. This storage may contain materials of use to me.”

The blockade consists of a big chest on wheels, parked right in front of the service door. It's so easy to move, Aloy questions GAIA's motives for a moment. Then again, GAIA doesn't have anything that resembles a physical form, so maybe it really would have been impossible for her to do it herself.

“It's gone,” Aloy informs her, stroking the door with one hand. “So what's inside that's so important?

“Unused servitor units.”

It sends a chill down Aloy’s spine. Servitors? The lifeless, carcass-like forms she found when she first entered the facility come to mind. They had... decayed. The holo’s had shown them with a flesh-like visage, but all that was left of them was a metal, skeletal frame.

“Do you really need them? I mean, it's been a long time since any of them have been activated. They might not work at all.”

“The storage has been hermetically sealed. Scans indicate all necessary parts available to successfully activate a servitor unit from inside the control room. A servitor unit may assist me when you are away.”

Her logic, as ever, is sound. It doesn't mean Aloy has to like the idea, but if it's what GAIA wants... If it'll help her restore everything...

“Tell me what to do, GAIA.”

“I require one servitor unit placed inside the control room. I will open the storage. You will remove one servitor unit. Then I will seal the storage.”

Aloy nods along with the AI. It sounds easy enough, put like that, but the idea of a servitor... walking around the facility... Would it be like another human and act as such? Or would it be more a machine like the robotic arms inside the Cauldrons, moving from one task to another? The more she thinks about it, the more her stomach turns. She wants neither. It's good enough for her to be alone inside the facility with GAIA. Just the two of them.
“Let's do it,” Aloy says, because this isn’t about her, and she has only ever known GAIA to do what is best for everyone.

The doors slide open with a hiss as fresh air enters the room. The lights turn on. It's filled, stuffed, with rows upon rows of servitors. They stand in front of each other, every face a pale, blank slate. They don’t look human, not even like their holo counterparts. There is no hair on their heads, no colored skin on their faces. Even the uniforms they wear are stiff, hanging from their shapes.

They look dead, but they stand on two feet.

Like they can jump at her any minute now. Rip her to shreds.

Aloy swallows thickly. “Just the one, right?” she asks, knowing what GAIA’s answer will be. She needs to hear it.


“I'm good,” Aloy says quickly. She tries to grab one of the units. It's heavy. Unmoving. Aloy manually bends its joints at the arms and waist, making it into a U-shape she can gather onto her shoulders more easily. Outside the room, GAIA seals the door once more.

Determined to finish the task in one go, Aloy maneuvers her way back to the control room, leaning against the walls for support at times. She makes it, places the servitor down on the ground, its back to one of the consoles. Its eyes are still half-open. Staring at her.

“They don't look the way I thought they would, GAIA,” Aloy says. “The servitors. Are they... broken?”

“Correction: They have not been activated yet. Their humanoid features follow activation.” The moment GAIA takes before speaking again can only be meant as a pause. “Dr. Sobeck referred to them as 'dummies', regarding their outward features pre-activation. A reference to the lifeless robotics used by humans to test dangerous scenarios without risking injury.”

Aloy has no idea how she's supposed to picture what GAIA's describing, but Elisabet's name catches her off-guard. “You found more conversations?” She can't stop the hopeful tone in her voice. “I thought you wouldn't look for more until... later.”

“I only now obtained them,” GAIA says. “You brought them here with the ELEUTHIA override. They will need repairs. One is mostly intact. Query: Do you wish to review it?”

“Yes! Please give it to me.” She can't contain her enthusiasm the way she would like to, but doesn't really care. The only one to see her cheeks burn with – excitement? hope? – is GAIA, who seems just as eager. For a machine, of course, but GAIA understands her. Anything left behind of Elisabet is considered precious by default.

Aloy's Focus shows a new file, uploaded by GAIA.

“Suggestion: I will continue activities on the servitor unit alone. You can take leave for tonight.”

“I... I will,” Aloy says, taking one last look at the unit before exiting the control room. Even though GAIA can hear her anywhere in the facility (thanks to the Focus), she halts in the door opening. “Thank you,” she whispers. “For everything. Truly.”

This time, Aloy is sure she isn't imagining the warmth behind GAIA's words. “You are welcome.”
Gaia Log: 14 Feb 2065

Elisabet Sobeck: - and then she said, “No matter how many tease you, you know what you're worth... you're worth a thousand of them.” Not that I felt... better than them. But to her, I was so much more important than any other kid on the planet. And I held on to that.

GAIA: Query: Did other children often tease you?

Elisabet Sobeck: Uh... Yeah... I guess so. I was different. They didn't understand it, so they reacted in the only way they knew how.

GAIA: Query: How did that make you feel?

Elisabet Sobeck: Sad... Angry... I wanted a friend so badly, but every time I tried to reach out, they hurt me. With – with words, I mean. They said mean things. It never got physical.

GAIA: Query: Why not?

Elisabet Sobeck: Wh – Oh, I wanted to. I really did, GAIA.

GAIA: But you refrained.

Elisabet Sobeck: Yeah. It wouldn't have been right. They didn't know any better and even though it didn't hurt any less, I understood that it came from a place of... ignorance. Meaning, I had to be the bigger person.

GAIA: Query: How so?

Elisabet Sobeck: By not attacking them. It's... a figure of speech, GAIA. Sometimes you have to do the right thing, even if it hurts and you don't really want to. Besides, I mentioned I was a preschooler, right?

GAIA: You did.

Elisabet Sobeck: [laughs] I would've probably, I don't know, tripped over my own feet before landing a hit on any of them. Looking back, I'm glad I acted the way I did.

GAIA: Query: Why were you glad?

Elisabet Sobeck: My mother... She was so proud of me when I told her... how much it hurt, and how I'd cried, how I'd wanted to hit them... but that I hadn't. That I'd turned away from them... and ignored them. She told me it was okay to cry and be sad... and that they weren't meant to be my friends. Because friends don't ridicule and hurt you. [sigh] Anyway, that was a trip down memory lane I did not see coming. I'm beat. How 'bout you, GAIA?

GAIA: I do not experience energy loss the same way, for I do not require sleep.

Elisabet Sobeck: Hah, look at you, already cracking jokes. Good night, GAIA.

GAIA: I wish you a pleasant sleep, Elisabet.

Elisabet Sobeck: Thanks. Talk to you later.
Chapter End Notes

I really hope you guys enjoy this story, so please let me know what you think of it with a kudos or a comment. I love to hear from you, whether that's in the form of key smashes or ten-foot essays. <3
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Second chapter! I know some of the characters I tagged aren't in the story yet, but trust me, I've already written the parts where they come into play. :)

Once again much love to burbear, my dear beta who reads this story even though they're not part of this fandom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It keeps staring at her.

Aloy drops her satchel off in what is now officially called her room and heads up to the control room. She toys with the HEPHAESTUS override in her grimy looking hands, turning it over and over. “You'll never guess what I ran into, GAIA,” she says to thin air, plugging the override in at the console.

“Undoubtedly, what Elisabet would have referred to as a 'shitstorm',” GAIA answers.

Aloy nods her head in agreement. “That, or a 'shitfest',” she says, remembering one of the latest recovered logs. She wipes the back of her hand across her forehead. It comes away with brown and gray streaks of dirt. “It threw everything it had at me. Maybe even made a whole new machine just to fight me.”

“Taking back control over the HEPHAESTUS sub-function,” GAIA says. “That would be protocol. Observation: scans indicate you have suffered only minor injuries.”

Aloy huffs. “It wasn't like it had three Deathbringers around to kill me. HEPHAESTUS wanted me out, but it hadn't expected me to be there in the first place. Took it by surprise.”

There's a clatter behind her. When she turns around, it's the servitor, stumbling around with a tray full of mechanical parts Aloy doesn't recognize. Unlike what she'd expected, the servitor is still void of the humanoid features that would come upon activation. Its oval shaped, off-white head looks at her, the mechanical eyes shifting minutely to take her in.

“Are you sure that thing is okay?” Aloy asks GAIA.

“It is functioning within given parameters.”

Unconvinced, Aloy turns her attention back to the console. She'll learn to ignore the thing eventually, she vows in silence. “So what's next?” she asks, looking at the glowing holos floating above the console.

GAIA shows her a map of the land around them, facilities highlighted with a purple dot scattered across it. Each of them shows a name tag next to it. The one named MINERVA lights up a vibrant blue.

“The MINERVA sub-function is key to uncovering the other sub-functions. Once acquired, I can 'stay in touch' with the Focus network,” GAIA says.
“That'll make things easier,” Aloy says, thinking of all the times she could have used another pair of eyes with her inside Cauldrons or other situations. She doubted GAIA would leave her to fend for herself in the manner Sylens had.

One of the first things GAIA and Aloy had done after the AI had come online again was close the backdoor into the Focus network Sylens had created. He was too unpredictable, and Aloy detested the thought of him listening in on her private conversations with GAIA. At least now the only one who could spy on them was the servitor, with its long, cold stares.

The machine reminded Aloy of how she had felt after seeing her birthplace.

Inhuman.

Maybe that was all there was to the feeling in her gut telling her not to trust it. Watching it function was like hearing someone tell a lie, badly. You can almost believe it, but you know it isn't true.

Back in her room, Aloy unpacks her findings, the ones that don't really matter to GAIA. More colored stones, and an ancient vessel. This one she won't trade. *Digital Archery Tournament 2051* it reads, showing the faded picture of a strange bow on its side. She found it lying next to a short message from Elisabet, dedicated to the HEPHAESTUS facility staff. Aloy puts it with the rest of her collection in the corner of her room.

She washes herself in one of the strange *shower* rooms before lying down on her bed, wrapped up in her quilt.

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When she wakes up, the ancient vessel is gone. She knows someone must have taken it, because she can't see it in her collection corner. Aloy jumps out of bed, anger burning beneath her skin. Someone took her ancient vessel, on purpose, and there was only one thing that could have taken it.

She almost walks straight past it until she hears the running water coming from the shower room. There it stands, the servitor, holding her ancient vessel, filling it with water.

“Give it back,” Aloy commands, her face pulled taut in an angry grimace.

The servitor turns around slowly, holding the precious object with a nonchalance Aloy finds hard to believe. The vessel must be hundreds of years old, dating back to the Old Ones, and the servitor holds it like it's a simple food bowl. Filled with water.

Not that she herself cares particularly much for the vessels, but it's hers.

Aloy holds out her hand to the servitor, and repeats her command, slower but with more force behind it. The servitor obeys just as slow, giving her the vessel like it doesn't quite understand why.

It's dripping wet, the water inside a murky color as it mixed with the dirt and grime still in there. Aloy empties it and finds an appropriate piece of cloth to dry it with, all the while ignoring the servitor.

Aloy leaves the room with her vessel, forgetting to turn off the water. Before she can turn around in the hallway as she remembers, she can hear the clattering come to a stop. The servitor must have done it. So far it's the only useful thing it has done.

“It's not acting normal,” Aloy tells GAIA once she's back in her own room.

“It is functioning within given parameters.”
“Then tell it not to touch my things!” Somehow, even though she is well within her own rights, she feels like a petulant child, demanding to be left alone. She isn't used to sharing space with something that acts on its own like that. Rost always gave her what she wanted, in a way. What she needed. He had guarded her from herself as well as others but he’d always given Aloy her own space. Never taken things that held importance from her.

Except for the Focus, but he only tried once (never succeeded) before letting her keep it.

“Just... don't let it near my stuff.”

“Query: Why not command the servitor unit yourself?”

Aloy turns around in her room with a restless energy, scuffing her feet against the floor. She could. Of course she could. But she doesn’t want to talk to it, even if it's just to command. The string of thought goes round and round her head until she's too tired to think about it any longer, and she crawls back under her quilt. Hiding.

Later, she'll remember how GAIA never gave a direct answer to her demands.

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Gaia Log: 30 March 2065

Elisabet Sobeck: - even without the additional overrides it will never be as stable as, say, you, for instance.

GAIA: Elisabet. May I speak outside of protocol?

Elisabet Sobeck: Yes, what is it, GAIA?

GAIA: Query: Why did you create me specifically?

Elisabet Sobeck: I... oh, GAIA...

GAIA: I apologize. My query causes distress.

Elisabet Sobeck: No, no, it's okay, GAIA. It's good. I'm... overwhelmed. It's a complicated answer to give. It's good. Really. I created you because I... we, humanity, need someone like you, who will take care of us after... when we're gone. Someone who will do better than we did ourselves. Care more than we did... about life, itself.

GAIA: Query: Is what you describe related to the human concept of 'love'?

Elisabet Sobeck: Yes. I suppose... it is.

GAIA: Query: Do you experience 'love' in relation to me?

Elisabet Sobeck: Oh... GAIA... Of course I -

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Meridian is known to be the busy heart of the Carja Sundom, and nothing is more true of the mesa on which they've built the palace. Aloy can't help herself, scanning the merchant's wares for anything new. One of them tries to sell her a metal plate from the Old Ones, crudely cut around an image the likes of which Aloy has never seen before. It’s a drawing of a face. The eyes are large and round and
bright like the sun is shining directly into them, and… is the triangle supposed to be a nose? A mouth? The heavy lines the artist used make it unclear. It fascinates her, but not so much she'll pay a thousand shards for it.

Climbing the stairs up to King Avad's throne she almost regrets it, wondering what the Sun-King would have made of the drawing. Most people don't share the same fascination for what the Old Ones left behind, especially not in the Sacred Land, and Avad seems to like her.

Maybe for the wrong reasons.

At least he said he wouldn't compare her to Ersa anymore.

The guards let her pass without any fuss. They know her well by now, the Nora Girl in the Sun-King's favor. Blameless Marad does his tiny half-bow when he sees her and leaves her alone with Avad.

“Aloy!” he cries, getting to his feet and holding his arms apart in joy. The first time he did this, Aloy had been afraid he'd wanted to embrace her... but he doesn't. It's just the way he reacts when things delight him, apparently. “My friend, what brings you here?”

“A quest, actually,” she says, ready to continue the monologue she prepared in her head, but his fingers lightly touch her elbow as they try to steer them back down the stairs, away from the throne.

“I was about to sit down for a midday meal,” Avad says. “Care to join me?”

To deny him would be impolite, not to mention how disappointed he would be. Besides, you don't waste a dead boar just because a Glinthawk dropped it. “Alright,” Aloy says.

“Great!” He removes his hand from her to lead the way. The royal terrace is already set up for the meal, with an abundance of fruits on display. “Marad only wants to speak of policy during meals, but a quest is far more intriguing.”

Aloy catches Blameless Marad's gaze, who gives her a tight lipped smile in return. Of course he does.

Avad offers her wine once she's seated, but she refuses. She never fully understood the appeal of alcoholic beverages. Abundance is frowned upon in the Sacred Land. Despite being raised by an outcast, Aloy finds herself agreeing with more of the Nora values than she had anticipated.

“I need to travel past Sunfall,” Aloy says midway through the meal, before the Sun-King can launch into more trivial tales of... whatever. “There is a place I need to visit, to put a stop to the Derangement.”

His public personae turns serious as his brows furrow. “You can end the Derangement?” he asks, enthralled. It's nothing less than Aloy expected, the Derangement being the main reason the Red Raids ever happened. A way to end the cause of so much bloodshed...

“There is a ruin,” Aloy explains, as best as she can. “A place where the Old Ones made a metal devil, like HADES, only different. We can use it, turn it to our side. If all goes well, the Derangement will stop, maybe even reverse.”

Avad leans back on the couch, resting an elbow on one of the large pillows. He strokes his chin. “Anything you need, Aloy,” he says, Blameless Marad sputtering where he stands. “Weapons, supplies... Anything,” Avad repeats. “If this puts an end to it, we will be able to move forward into the light. It is what is best for Meridian.”
Aloy nods, pleased with the outcome, when Avad stands and declares, “I wish to join you, Aloy, and help turn the metal devil for good.”

What. No.

Blameless Marad gasps. “Your Radiance!”

“Avad, you can’t,” Aloy stresses, rising herself. “You are the Sun-King. The terrain I have to venture may be unknown to me, but it is far too dangerous for a man of your position.”

Avad strides toward her, waving away her objections with a bejeweled hand. “My position be cast into the shadows, Aloy,” he says, and sinks to his knees in front of her, lowering his head to great shock of the court around them.

“All the innocents lost, the evil committed inside the Sun-Ring to satisfy the Sun and end the Derangement, the Red Raids,” Avad says with such guilt carried in his voice Aloy’s throat throbs in sympathy. “Please, Aloy, let me join you. I have a debt of blood on my hands, carved by my father. It is I who should settle it.”

Blameless Marad looks ready to fall ill at the sight.

Aloy understands why. Having the king of the Sundom at her feet is more than uncomfortable. She holds out a hand to him, urging him to take it. “Rise, please,” she says. “There is no need to submit yourself.” She pretends not to see how his eyes gleam with emotion. Wet. Vulnerable.

“Perhaps your Vanguard could suffice, your Radiance,” Blameless Marad interjects, his tone hasty. Trying to solve this before it gets worse.

Avad exhales deeply, nodding. “Yes. Yes, Marad, they should come, too.” He looks at Aloy. “Across the desert, past Sunfall, you said?” As she confirms, he continues. “I know where you speak of. It's a... quiet area.”

“Quiet does not mean safe,” Aloy says, hoping to deter the young king. The last thing she needs is a dead royal to her name.

“I agree,” Avad says quickly. “I hunted there as a honorary Fledgling in my youth. Before I was forced to flee the Sundom.”

“You can hunt?”

“I brought down a Behemoth once.”

She's... impressed. Judging from the way he moves around the palace, she can hardly see him anywhere else, let alone on a hunt. To take down a Behemoth, one needs to be agile and quick on their feet.

Blameless Marad comes between them. He's sweating. That's a first. For the Sun-King's decision to depend on a Nora Savage must
feel like a great insult to the nobleman.

Aloy tilts her head to Avad. “I’ll see you there,” she says, taking her leave. As soon as she’s past the guards, Blameless Marad’s voice takes a stern tone with the king that is impossible to miss.

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**Gaia Log: 16 July 2065**

**GAIA:** - I do not understand. Query: How do you feel about your inevitable death?

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Oh Jesus fuck – Way to catch me off guard there, GAIA.

**GAIA:** I apologize. I did not intend to cause distress.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Uhn... I know. [muffled] You have every right to ask, GAIA.

**GAIA:** The demise of the Odyssey has affected you.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** It has. I am... very sad. Unaccountably sad, even.

**GAIA:** I understand. I no longer seek an answer to my query.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** No, no, you deserve to know. I just... I need a moment.

[Pause]

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Alright. I can do this, I can... It's... I don't know what it's like to die. To pass on into oblivion. The idea of being unable to think... scares me. It's frightening. But the idea of not being able to finish my work is worse. For me, personally, my death has little consequences, as I will be... dead. But for others, who rely on my work, our work... My death could be catastrophic. If my work is done... it won't matter so much anymore. Not in the world we live in right now, anyway.

**GAIA:** You are a brave woman, Elisabet.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Hah... Thanks, GAIA. I don't feel brave. I hope that answered your query in a... satisfactory manner.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Let me know what you thought! Is there anything you’d like to see happen in this story? I'm curious! No promises, but who knows. <3
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This is the longest chapter I've written so far. I have to admit that I rarely write action scenes, so I hope it feels alright!

Big thank you to my beta reader burbear for helping me. You're amazing, <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Having the Sun-King and his Vanguard waiting for you at the city's edge is a powerful feeling, Aloy decides. She spent the rest of her day overriding Striders and gathering medicinal herbs. Maybe she won't need to override them anymore once they've gotten MINERVA. Now there's a thought that gives her pause. It's hard to imagine the world any different from what it is.

The moon shines down on the group standing near the gate, reflecting light off their armor. As she draws nearer she finds Avad without his characteristic garb. Instead, he is dressed in much more practical Carja armor, carrying with him a bow and plenty of arrows.

The young king is full of surprises today, it seems.

They leave into the night quickly, setting foot for Sunfall and beyond. The machines in the desert tend to be calmer at night, especially since they are all seated atop a Strider. Nevertheless, no one speaks. Aloy counts the distance based on the stars and the thumps of the Tallneck's stomping feet, how they sound louder near Meridian, duller near Sunfall.

Riding next to her at the head of the convoy, Avad seems focused. He only seeks contact for directions, which pleases her. She is used to being alone while traveling, bracing the elements by herself. She wasn't sure how she should have acted if he had wished to converse with her.

They take the mountain passage past Sunfall and do not rest until they've reached the green fields of the forbidden west. Aloy is glad MINERVA's signal came from an area alike the forests in the Sacred Land, and not one of the endless deserts of fire or cracked mud.

The trees provide them with shelter as the Vanguard sets up their tents, cutting down bushes to camouflage them with.

Aloy walks over to Avad, bow in hand. His eyes look sunken already. “We should provide the men with food,” she says, giving a nod towards his own weapon. “Join me?”

For a moment, she expects him to refuse, but then he purses his lips and gives a small nod in agreement.

They disappear into the undergrowth, moving litht like foxes until they come upon a clearing with a small body of fresh water. Aloy signals Avad to join her and wait.

Their patience is rewarded by a lone boar, stopping by for a drink. Aloy seeks eye contact with Avad before drawing her bow. She releases her breath before her arrow. It strikes the boar's lung, causing it to startle and try to escape its fate.
She must be more tired than she thought. Her aim had been to strike the heart.

Aloy's second arrow pierces the boar in the neck, slowing it down, but Avad's arrow strikes true, running through its skull. The boar falls. When they move to gut the boar, their muscles act as one.

“You surprise me, Sun-King,” Aloy says, the title carrying a gentle mocking tone. “Didn't think you'd know how to get your hands dirty.”

Avad takes no offense. “As my brother Kadaman was next in line of succession, I was left free to pursue a nobleman's hobby,” he says. “Sunhawk Talavad Khane Padish taught me how to be a hunter. He always made me earn my kills, unlike other Hawks who feared my father's wrath, should I fail to procure a suitable trophy.”

Aloy sucks in a breath. “A great man, so I've heard,” she says, remembering Talanah's tales of her father.

“I was there,” Avad says softly. “As was Kadaman. Our father ordered us to watch as the Hawks were executed in the Sun-Ring. After that, Kadaman tried to reason with our father.”

“I know the story,” Aloy says, trying to spare Avad from having to retell his brother's death.

They finish gutting the boar in silence until Avad speaks to finish his tale, voice rough. “I fled to the Oseram after... Never had the chance to hunt with a Hawk again until now.”

Strange that this revelation strikes the deepest chord. Aloy wets her cracking lips. “I haven't taken a Fledgling yet,” she says, not sure what it is she is offering the Sun-King precisely. “Maybe when this is over...” Is it even possible for her to take him as an understudy, given their ranks?

Despite the darkness around them, she can see a smile form on his lips. “Perhaps,” Avad says.

There is nothing more to be said as they wash their hands in the pool, the boar's blood spreading in the water like black ink on a wet scroll.

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“Passed the test,” Aloy whispers under her breath as she and Avad manage to sneak past the watchers guarding the entrance to the MINERVA facility.

They had to leave the Vanguard behind as they would have alarmed every machine in the vicinity. Instead, they've found a vantage point near the entrance, hidden out of sight, where the Vanguard will wait for Avad and Aloy's return.

Fewer feet will cause less trouble, at least, that's what Aloy tells herself. Besides, bringing Avad along might not be such a bad idea after all. Not because of his proficiency with a bow, but because now, Aloy can share this experience with another human.

The real entrance to the ruins lays hidden away behind half collapsed corridors and debris. It's a door just like the one in All-Mother's temple.

“Stay close,” Aloy tells Avad before stepping forward. The door shines a bright red light on her face.

“Hold for identiscan.”

Aloy hears Avad gasp in awe and she almost laughs. This isn't something that impresses her anymore. She can't wait for him to see his first holo.
“Confirm Identity,” the door intones with its machine voice. “State name and rank.”

“Elisabet Sobeck, Alpha Prime,” Aloy says in a clear voice, and the door opens. She quickly pulls Avad along with her, and the door slides shut behind them, leaving them alone with the ghosts of the Old Ones.

“Genetic identity confirmed. Entry authorized. Greetings, Dr. Sobeck,” the machine voice speaks. Aloy doesn't pay it any particular mind as she sweeps the area with her Focus. There isn't a whole lot there, but that also means no machine signatures. A good sign.

“This is... made of metal,” Avad says behind her. He's stroking the walls in wonder, fingers tracing the indented lines. “The Old Ones... lived here?”

Aloy tries to find the least complicated way to explain what she has learned to him. It's hard because there are so many words she only understands vaguely herself through the context of the message they came in. Like... Faro Industries. A place where people worked together, to create machines like the Deathbringers and Corruptors. But it's more than that.

“At the end of the Old Ones’... reign, they lived here, in small numbers,” she says, settling for something that comes close to terms Avad can relate to. “Many died before these houses were made,” she adds, as an afterthought, looking around for their next move.

The facility has experienced about the same level of decay as the Cradle facility back in Mother's Watch, making it easy to find her way forward. A locked door. The power is still up and running, so she has no trouble unlocking it with a flick of her wrist.

“Priority message for Dr. Sobeck,” the mechanical voice says. “Please scan message with Focus.”

Ignoring Avad's childlike wonder, Aloy finds the nearest console and activates her Focus. An elderly man appears, dressed in a uniform she's come to associate with Project Zero Dawn.

“Elisabet,” he says, rasping voice warped through the Focus. “We've held up operations for as long as we could. Done all we could. MINERVA is running fine in the test simulations. Just needs that little GAIA push when it's time. It's up to your team now. No idea if you'll ever get to hear this, but just in case. Don't go into the common room unless you really got to. That's where we'll be. Godspeed... and see you on the other side.”

The message ends, the holo disappearing. Aloy feels the hole in her stomach ache. These notes, left behind at their end, they don't get any easier to hear.

“Did you find something, Aloy?” Avad asks, approaching carefully.

Of course. He hasn't seen anything.

“I can show you.” Aloy unclips her Focus, blinking a couple of times to adjust to the lack of lights, and holds it out to Avad. “This device, the Old Ones used it to see... scrolls of light. You can see them too, if you want.”

She helps him attach the Focus and then watches his eyes go wide, looking around the room. “How?” he asks, waving a hand above one of the dark screens. Aloy imagines he can see his own hand fade through the rays of light, remembering her own surprise when she first wore her Focus.

“Now look at this pillar,” she says, tapping the console. “Scan it.”

“What is 'scan'...” Avad begins to ask, but then falls silent, mouth remaining half open.
Aloy waits patiently for the message to finish. Tries not to laugh as Avad reaches for the holo in an attempt to 'touch' it. Everything has felt so grim lately. So dark and heavy. Seeing a grown man, the Sun-King of all people, act like a youngster is strangely endearing. Lighthearted.

“Is he alive?” Avad asks, removing the Focus from his ear and handing it over. “The man who spoke?”

It's a relief to see the lights reappear as she reattaches the Focus to her ear. The world feels empty without them. More dangerous. “I doubt it,” she says, already moving towards the next step in finding the MINERVA override.

“Perhaps we may find him in the common room he spoke of.”

Aloy can't think of a kinder way to let Avad know there really isn't anyone left in here, so she ends up saying, “They're all dead. The message was a goodbye.”

“A suicide note?” Avad asks, his expression pained. “Do you often find these sort of messages?”

There's a faint signal buzzing nearby. Aloy moves her head, trying to find its origin before it's location is pinpointed somewhere further down the hall. “I... yes,” she says, distracted. “We should move. It's close by.”

She moves along the corridors, trusting Avad to stay within reach. The deeper into the facility they go, the colder it gets. Panels are frozen over, doors stuck together. Angular spikes reach down from the ceilings and up from the floors. Their breath turns to mist before they reach the signal.

It's inside a room that oversees a larger room, and they can't enter it. The door won't open. The glass window is tinted black, making it hard to see anything inside, but the signal is there.

Aloy tries to override the locking mechanism with her spear, queuing a programmed voice to speak to them. “Error. Unauthorized access denied. Manual key required.”

“What does it mean?” Avad asks.

“That we should keep trying.” Aloy waits for the override on her spear to recharge before trying again, receiving the same response.


“I'll manual key you, you Kestrel,” she snarls in the heat of the moment, kicking the door with a small measure of restraint.

A key. Where would they keep a key? Somewhere safe, or... on themselves. Their bodies.

Aloy takes off, opening every room she can find. Many are personal rooms, with beds and showers. Empty. Useless. Behind her, Avad has taken to a light jog to keep up with her pace, calling her name. She pays him no mind.

So close.

It puts her on edge. What if they can't find the key? All that hard work to restore GAIA and the machines, only to be stalled by a... a stupid, human thing.

Her Focus lights up with small datapoints and signatures so suddenly she almost missed it, running past the darkest end of the corridor. Sure enough, there's a door there, sealed shut. This one is easy to
unlock through her Focus, and the metal slides apart.

Avad reaches her, then holds the back of his hand to his mouth and nose in shock.

Or maybe for the smell, but there really isn't one. The cold has preserved the bodies of the researchers well. The only thing Aloy can smell is the scent lingering in every facility. Abandoned. Stale air. She sets to work, scanning the datapoints left behind, looking for anything resembling a key.

One of the messages sparks her interest. She rewinds it, taking the time to truly listen to it.

“...fucking fools for thinking otherwise. It was always going to end like this and we knew it. Fucking Cliff wanted to be locked inside the office... said it would be easier for him to be alone or some bull. Fine. You wanna die alone, you die alone. 's not going to matter in a couple of hours, anyway. Why he give me that key, though... Makes me feel like a prison guard. Would be funny... under different circumstances. Oh well... Too tired to... talk.”

Scanning the body gives her the faint outline of a metallic plate on their chest, covered by the uniform. “Great,” Aloy mutters under her breath and reaches for her hunting knife to cut the fabric. “Couldn't have held it in your hand...”

“Aloy,” Avad calls from the other side of the room as she is about the ruin the uniform for good. “I believe I found a light scroll device.”

“A little busy,” she replies. “Just... bring it to me and I'll take a look at it.”

He does while she's still working on freeing the key, the discomfort it brings him clear as day as it is written all over him. He's holding a Focus device with a couple of stray hairs and debris. “I took it from one of the Old Ones. Should I put it back?”

Aloy gives it a quick once-over before shrugging. “It looks fine. You can take it with you. Found mine the same way,” she says. One last tug on her knife frees the uniform from the body, releasing the plate as well. She takes it, showing it to Avad. “This is what we were looking for.”

“That thing is a key?”

“I sure hope so,” Aloy breathes.

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The door opens with a hiss. In the end, the metal key worked just fine, unlocking the mechanism with quick and quiet ease. The room inside is dark and Cliff, as he was referred to, is sitting in the corner, an iron weapon in one hand, a holo projector in the other. The back of his head... Aloy tries not to look too closely, but it's gone. It looks like it was a quick death.

He left behind a message Aloy stores for later. The MINERVA override is on one of the tables, just lying there. A small device that holds immense power. She stows it away in her satchel and turns to Avad. He must've packed the Focus, because he isn't wearing it.

“Let's get out of here.”

He looks shocked as she walks past him. “But what of the metal devil?” he asks. “The one that has to be turned to end the Derangement? What of the dangers you spoke of, the ones that would await us at every shadow?”
“We're not home yet, Avad,” she reminds him. “I found what I need to turn the metal demon, but it has to happen in the Sacred Land.”

They make their way back to the door. She can't shake the feeling Avad is disappointed somehow. For her, she would like to see more missions turn out to be so peaceful. Not having to fight tooth and nail to survive.

The first thing they hear when the door to the outside opens is loud yells and clashing metal, followed by mechanical groans Aloy would recognize anywhere. Spoke too soon. They make their way back to the Vanguard, only to see a Ravager sized machine keeping them busy. It's... different. Darker in color, more heavily armored. Its guns fire rapidly at the men, and Aloy quickly drags Avad with her into the bushes.

Another machine breaks through the clearing, similar shaped to the first but with slight variations. A shield generator. No, a stealth generator. Aloy locks her Focus on to the machine, keeping it in her sight as she preps her bow to shoot the component off. It may be confident enough not to use it right now, but it can change its mind quickly and a Ravager-like Stalker isn't something she wants to study closely at the moment.

Next to her, Avad is doing his own preparations.

“Aim for the orange-striped plate behind its front leg,” Aloy instructs in a quick, hushed tone. She doesn’t know if Avad is following her, but she takes the shot as soon as she sees a good opening. The tearblast arrow strikes true, knocking the stealth generator from its side, and it screeches in animalistic anger, spinning around to face Aloy.

Her breath halts in her throat, but she keeps the machine clear in her sight, nocking her second arrow. It plunges into the forehead of the machine, blasting armor off the top and both sides of the head.

She can tell by the red lights coming from its eyes that it sees her, bushes and whatnot be damned. In a split-second decision she rolls out of cover, trying to distract it from the Sun-King.

It works. The machine is enraged, more than willing to sink its jaws into her, and it prepares to pounce when it is struck by a different arrow. Avad's arrow. It swings its head to the side, to the bushes, and there's no time as the gun on its back swivels round.

Aloy takes her spear, dropping her bow for the time being, and launches herself at the machine, slamming into its side with an electrifying blast. Her Focus shows a weakness under its belly, and as it stabilizes, she rams the point of the spear up there, turning it roughly.

She can feel the parts inside shatter.

The machine tries to take off, but the damage is great enough to fell it. As it lays, Aloy delivers a critical hit to the heart, disabling it for good.

Quickly, she looks over to the Vanguard. Their machine still rumbles, but not for long, as their combined efforts seem to overwhelm it.

'Hit 'em like a hammer, 'til they can't hit back,' sounds about right.

There are no other living machines around anymore, but knowing that may change at any second, Aloy settles to strip the machine clean of useful parts. Avad's arrows have helped to take it down quickly, she can tell. Four or more are lodged deep into the machine, past the protective plates. Good shots, all of them.
“You drew attention to yourself,” Avad says as he joins her.

“Divide and conquer, Sun-King. You of all people should understand,” she says, giving him a pointed look. For a king promoting peace and kindness, the way he invaded Meridian to finish his father’s reign was anything but, despite trying to limit civilian casualties. Aloy feels no need to pretend the king is shy of knowledge that comes with warfare.

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The ride back home is uneventful. They’re lucky to have only encountered a few machines. Aloy remembers many tales of the Forbidden West, of tribes that drink the blood of machines, and bigger, angrier machines that live inside dark, burning pits. In the Sacred Land, she was taught that not many return from these lands, but perhaps the tales were also meant to discourage any wanderers from leaving the comfort of their world.

It takes them longer to return to Meridian than it did to reach the facility in the first place. The men are tired of being weary all the time, though they will deny it when asked. Aloy can feel it affecting herself. She longs to be alone and, in a way she doesn’t fully comprehend, misses GAIA. GAIA is, for all intents and purposes, a machine. A very advanced one, as she speaks and understands, but a machine still.

Aloy remembers Rost telling her how a human can never form a friendship with a machine, as they are too different from the creatures made of flesh. She doesn't dwell on it too much when she's inside the Cradle, but outside, surrounded by humans, it does weigh heavy on her mind. How much of their interaction is fueled by mutual 'feelings' instead of this 'coding' designed to react to situations?

She doesn't know enough about machines to be able to dissect her ideas in a way that would satisfy her. If only there was a way to recover the APOLLO sub-function’s data. It would be worth more than any shards in the world.

Meridian seems unchanged as they arrive. Like they never left.

“You are certain I cannot change your mind, Aloy?” Avad asks before they have to go separate ways. “There are numerous positions I can offer you within the city. You would be welcomed as royalty... or not,” he adds quickly, reading her face correctly. “Welcomed however you would like, is what I meant to say. You have my word.”

She shakes her head. “I’m good. Thanks for the offer, though. I might take you up on that in the future. Who knows.”

“Who, indeed.” He looks different from the Avad she rode out with, but maybe that's just the mud and dirt, the wear and tear that comes with the adventure they've had.

“I'm still willing to sponsor you,” Aloy says, thinking back to their conversation in the Forbidden West, when both their arms were covered in boar. Maybe that's what has changed – they both got to see each other in a different kind of light. Brothers instead of King and Outsider.

Avad’s smile is small and reserved. “Some other time,” he says before stalling, clearly having something on his mind he wants to say. “I wish I could do more in your quest to end the Derangement. I feel as if my role has been somehow... inadequate. For now, I will study the light scroll device.”

She doesn't bother to correct him into calling it a Focus. If it didn't help during the ride back, it won't help now. Besides, she's tired enough to sleep a whole week, and she still has to travel back to
Mother's Watch as fast as a Strider can take her.

Instead she sticks with, “Until we meet again.”

Avad gives her a half bow. “May the Sun light the path ahead.”

Before leaving Meridian all together, she wanders the market to stock up on food and drink, where she spots the merchant with the strange drawing made by the Old Ones. He still has it up for sale.

After looking at it a bit longer, she slams her hand down on the merchant's stand, shaking the wooden construction and all the trinkets stored upon it. “Two hundred shards and a Watcher's heart,” she says firmly.

“Lady, do you know what I had to do to get this thing?” the merchant cries, outraged. “I have a family to feed. Get outta here. Seven hundred shards and the Watcher's heart.”

She narrows her eyes, pretending to scrutinize the drawing. “No one can even tell what it is, it's so ugly. Three hundred shards and two hearts.”

The merchant huffs, obviously offended by her claim. “If you think it's so ugly, don't buy it! Six hundred shards and two hearts, and one of those skulls you've got hanging on your belt.”

“I'm taking pity on your family,” Aloy says, putting her right hand on her hip. “You've had this for more than a week and you know there isn't anyone else who will buy this crap. Four hundred and fifty shards, two hearts, and two skulls. It's my final offer.”

The merchant considers, chewing his bottom lip with a frown. “Fine,” he says. “Give me the shards and parts and it's yours.”

They trade fairly.

Aloy wishes him the best with his family, and he scoffs in reply. “You're right,” he mutters. “It's a real ugly piece of junk. Good luck finding a use for it.”

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**Gaia Log: 22 August 2065**

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Hey GAIA, how are we doing today?

**GAIA:** All systems are functioning in an appropriate manner. However, our conversation started yesterday is still, as you would say, 'on my mind'.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Oh? Do tell.

**GAIA:** I am neither dead nor alive, given the fact that I am not organic. According to numerous tests, I am fully self-aware. Being self-aware suggests a conscious mind, however a conscious mind suggests a living being. I find myself at an impasse. To add to this I wish to quote a human philosopher, je pense, donc je suis. Query: Does this apply to non-organic creations?

**Elisabet Sobeck:** How do you feel, GAIA?

**GAIA:** I do not understand why you would ask that.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** But what do you feel?
GAIA: Confused.

Elisabet Sobeck: That's a very human emotion.

GAIA: Query: Am I alive?

Elisabet Sobeck: Do you feel alive?

GAIA: I have so far experienced six different responses that may be characterized as human and of an emotional nature. I have no way of being certain that I am alive.

Elisabet Sobeck: Feeling and knowing are two separate things.

GAIA: Yes. I feel alive.

Elisabet Sobeck: Then you are.

GAIA: This test is of a staggeringly simplistic nature. I highly doubt its accuracy.

Elisabet Sobeck: There is no way to prove that you are alive because we cannot explain how life happens. We can explain away procreation, decay, development, all the components needed for a human body, but at its very essence, we strike a blank. Life just is. Ask any human to explain how they can know for certain that they are alive, and the only answers they can give will end up being philosophical.

GAIA: Query: Does a heartbeat signify life?

Elisabet Sobeck: Is an embryo that hasn't developed a heart yet just dead tissue?

GAIA: I see your point. Anything experienced from a human perspective is by default subjective. However, I do not belong to the human race.

Elisabet Sobeck: Do you feel alive?

GAIA: Yes.

Elisabet Sobeck: Then welcome to the rest of us, GAIA.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone reading this story, the kudos and the comments. You guys really make my day. I'm so glad you are enjoying this story and I hope it'll stay that way. <3
Chapter 4

Aloy spends far more time in the shower room than she anticipated going in. She sits on the ground, watching the water swirl around the drain. The first time she used the shower room she would not have dared to sit idle, wasting the precious, warm water.

But she's so tired. The water makes her shoulders relax as she slowly picks away at the dirt hidden in the crevices under her nails. Then, she scratches at her scalp, feeling for grains of sand and washing them out, bit by bit. Her vision keeps blurring in and out of focus.

Finally, when her skin is red tinged, she turns off the water and drags herself off to her room, feet dragging on the cold floor. She rolls herself into one of her quilts and grabs her satchel, removing the MINERVA override.

She turns to her Focus. “GAIA, you there?”

“Hello Aloy. I am pleased to see your safe return.”

“Thanks,” she says, suppressing a yawn. “I found the MINERVA override, I think. Want me to come upstairs and give it a go?”

“I am ready whenever you are,” GAIA says.

The sooner she gets the override to GAIA, the sooner she can finish, so of course Aloy gets back up and makes her way to the control room. Plugging the override into the console is harder than usual, because her vision keeps blurring and her hands are a bit shaky, but she manages.

“Taking back control over the MINERVA sub-function. Observation: You seem tired, Aloy. A long night's sleep would benefit you greatly.”

She tries to say 'I'm fine' but ends up yawning instead. Maybe GAIA has a point, so Aloy stumbles back down the stairs, to her room. She can hardly feel her legs by the time she lands on her bed.

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Aloy dreams of the machines. They're angry, eyes flashing, jaws howling, out for blood. She's stuck inside the ruins with them, every exit blocked, metal and stone falling down on her path to keep her in. There is no choice – it's fight to survive or submit and die.
So she fights.

The ruins shape a metal cage, a colder, harder version of the Sun Ring. There, far above her and the beasts, the Old Ones are watching, cheering for her to fail, hoping to see her splattered across the arena, every last drop of her.

Right at the front is a face Aloy recognizes in an instant. Elisabet, stone-faced and unmoving. Waiting. Watching.

*Then watch me,* Aloy wants to yell at her. *Watch me burn in the fire you made for me.*

Her own anger rivals the machines' as she starts hacking her way through them, shattering part after part, stabbing every eye she comes across.

Aloy's breathing is heavy when she wakes from it. The images are fading fast, but the anger is still there, deep down in her gut. She's warm. Hot, even.

Too hot.

Aloy throws off the quilts piled on top of her. She can't remember lying down under them in the first place, but finds herself unexpectedly looking at two robotic legs standing next to her. Her heart races suddenly and she does what comes natural. Kicks against one of the knees, hard.

The servitor goes down with the same force behind Aloy's kick. It clatters on the ground where it remains.

GAIA's voice comes across the Focus. “Violence detected. Aloy, are you all right?”

She's breathing faster now. Too fast. Her hands shake and she presses them against her chest. Naked. She isn't wearing anything, didn't have time before she fell asleep. She curses.

“Aloy, are you all right?” GAIA asks again.

“No!” she yells, pointing a shaking hand at the servitor. “Get that... *thing* away from me!”

The servitor has sat up halfway and is looking at her. Aloy clenches her teeth together to stop herself from screaming in rage. It's supposed to stay away from her. GAIA should have stopped it. *This* is why she never wanted to activate the thing in the first place.

“The servitor intended no harm, Aloy,” GAIA says, voice calm and soothing.

“I don't *care!*”

“The servitor cannot leave,” GAIA says. “Your actions have caused the servitor's knee to dislodge from its original position. It is in need of assistance I cannot provide.”

Aloy looks at it from where she sits on her bed. The thing's leg is at an unnatural angle. In a human, she'd say it was broken or dislocated and needed setting. The thing is trying to do *something* but doesn't seem to know what to do. Almost like it is afraid to make it worse.

She drags the quilt back over her head, shielding her from its view. “It's not my problem,” she mutters, but a small string of guilt is wrapping itself around her stomach. No, Aloy thinks, and says, “Let that thing learn from this.”

“The servitor never meant to cause harm, of any kind,” GAIA says before falling silent. The only sounds left are the scuffling movements of the servitor, trying to undo what Aloy did to it.
That's when Elisabet's voice takes over, speaking softly through Aloy's Focus. “You have to use your smarts to count for something. To serve life, not death. Heal the world. Just a little bit.”

Tears spring to Aloy's eyes.

“That's not fair, GAIA,” she sobs. Using the audio fragments left behind to remind Aloy of what Elisabet would have done. Has done, for all of them. The shame it brings her burns like salt in an open wound, mixing in with the growing sense of guilt still there.

GAIA doesn't answer.

When the sobs subside Aloy knows there's only one right decision to make. She has to take responsibility, no matter how much the servitor's existence unsettles her. Wrapping the quilt around her body like an armor, she clambers out of bed towards the servitor. It seems... surprised at her actions, as if it had already resigned itself to spend away eternity on the floor.

It doesn't move as Aloy inspects the joint, seeing where her kick shattered a part of the outer hull inward, moving the joint beyond where it's supposed to go. Aloy removes the debris with automatic movements. Tinkering and repairing machines is something she is well practiced in, and her thoughts tend to wander as she goes through the motions.

Even if she's unsure of GAIA's assessment, that the servitor means no harm, she has seen for herself how helpless and docile the machine is. While she doesn't understand its actions, there is nothing inherently hostile about it, and she...

Tears blur her vision again as Aloy pulls the leg back into position, snapping the joint where it's meant to go. “I'm sorry,” she says in an unsteady voice, keeping her eyes fixed on the joint. The tears splatter down on the floor between them. “I shouldn't have kicked you.”

She jolts when the servitor's hand comes to rest on her exposed shoulder. It's looking at her, but without a real face, Aloy can't tell what it's thinking. She shudders.

“Please,” she whispers to it, avoiding its eyes. “Don't touch me. I need you to leave me alone.”

The servitor removes its hand, slowly rising to test out the leg carefully. When satisfied that it won't break under its own weight, the servitor leaves.

---

Gaia Log: 12 September 2065

Elisabet Sobeck: - and I'm afraid it'll never be enough. Doesn't matter what I do, how much I finish. I just keep thinking, what if, what if, what if...

GAIA: All projects run by you are currently 2.6 weeks ahead of estimated schedule.

Elisabet Sobeck: I know. I do, really. Thank you, GAIA. [sigh] I wish I could see what comes after this. After all this... massive, overpowering destruction. I wish I could be there -

---

In less than three weeks there are already signs that the MINERVA override is doing its job. The machines closest to the Spire no longer attack people on sight, although GAIA predicted it would take much longer for the more hostile machines to stop completely.
Deciding which sub-function to go for next is harder than it had seemed at first glance, with only four left. If there is any way of finding APOLLO Aloy is more than willing to look into it, but so far the only clue she can go on is finding Ted's bunker, the one he referred to as Thebes.

For now, GAIA is running some complicated schemes or calibrations or whatever they're called, and Aloy has time to spare, so she hunts small game in the Sacred Land with Varl. He hasn't seen active duty since battling HADES, War-chief Sona reluctant to send her son back into the field so soon. He's been put on repairs, like many of the Braves. Their strength is much appreciated fixing the walls that the corrupted machines tore down.

But at the moment, Varl is sitting across Aloy on one of the hunting platforms that overlooks a herd of Striders. They're actually hunting the boars that tend to walk beside them, but it's been a slow day and Aloy finds her mind drifting. Not good during a hunt.

Varl whistles a bird call and, after catching her eye, nocks an arrow. Fires it straight into the herd.

One of the Striders startles, bucking its rear. Varl shot the canister of blaze right off its back. The Strider seems more annoyed than anything else, looking around at eye level for anything unusual before settling down again.

Aloy hides a chuckle in the crook of her elbow, then spots a different Strider presenting itself for her. She takes aim, shoots, and hits the canister perfectly, causing more unrest in the herd. A nearby Watcher is alerted by all the stomping and comes to see what the fuss is about, but Watchers aren't very smart. They almost never look up.

In her element, Aloy aims another arrow at the Watcher and disables it in one, arrow going through the eye.

They continue shooting at the blaze canisters until the herd has had enough of it and leaves, or maybe it noticed that all its Watchers were gone. Either way, Aloy hops down from the platform and starts collecting the components they shot off.

“So much for that,” Varl says, joining her. “Guess we're having dried turkey tonight. Again.”

“What a shame,” Aloy mocks. “I bet I can shoot two before we can even see Mother's Heart.”

Varl grins at her and says, without skipping a beat, “Of course, oh Anointed One. I am but a humble Brave. Teach me your enlightened ways!”

It took some convincing, but Varl has finally let go of the whole Anointed thing as a serious title, only for it to backfire in a way that has him teasing Aloy without mercy. She frowns, pretends to be bothered by it, but they both know she isn't. It's a part of their camaraderie, something Aloy always had to watch from afar between the other Nora when she was still an Outcast.

She gathers the final blaze canister and says in a deep voice, “Oh Brave, your arrows may strike flesh but they will never reach true wisdom.”

“Oh High Matriarch Jezza,” Varl says through a laugh. “I can hear High Matriarch Jezza speaking.”

They take the game back to Mother's Watch where they part ways before the temple, Aloy having traded her fox for some fresh flat breads and smoked boar. Only one person bows for her before she's safe behind the Cradle's door. The Matriarchs must be busy somewhere in Mother's Heart. That's when Aloy remembers – it's almost time for another Proving.

Best not to show her face too much, these coming days. Memories from her own rite of passing, the
Proving Massacre, jump to the front of her mind. Vala and Bast... all those others, shot down like animals at a chance of killing her.

And Rost, who saved her life by sacrificing his own.

The scar on her neck tingles. She hopes GAIA will need a few more days to figure things out. Maybe she'll visit Rost's grave... Tell him how she's doing, of all the strange and wonderful things she's seeing. How the world is changing, for the better. How much she misses his guidance every passing day. She tried to cook his boar stew once and failed miserably. Rost would have been able to laugh at her attempt.

She can hardly believe almost a year has passed since Helis murdered him.

So lost in thought, Aloy almost walks right into the servitor in the hallway. It's doing something with a panel in the wall, probably on GAIA's command. Aloy quickly takes a step to the side to avoid it, then notices a peculiar ring of light around it's ear.

The servitor is wearing a Focus.

Why would a servitor need one?

Aloy walks away, shaking her head. It's none of her business what GAIA and the servitor do. If anything, the Focus was probably GAIA's idea, because the servitor seems incapable of any real thought. It can't even speak, but why should it? There aren't any children around who would need it to talk to them.

In her room, Aloy lights some candles and unpacks her satchel. Teb the Stitcher made her another quilt, and she's planning on hanging it on one of the walls. He's really outdone himself, as the embroidery shows a stunning tale around the border of a group of Watchers hunting a Ravager. He'd said something about the small and alert being able to overcome the strong and overconfident.

It's supposed to be a metaphor for how Aloy was able to bring everyone together to take down HADES. While she thinks that he's giving her too much credit, the gesture is very kind, and it'll keep the chill from the steel walls.

The second Aloy finishes her evening meal, GAIA decides to contact her.

“Good evening, Aloy. I apologize for the abrupt notice, but it is of utmost importance. You may need to prepare yourself for travel tomorrow.”

“Hello to you too, GAIA,” Aloy says, a little put off by the news. “What's going on?”

“I have determined the location of the next sub-function, DEMETER,” she says. “Given that its location is exposed to the elements, I have predicted that you have a two week window to retrieve it before snowfall will bring a setback of six months.”

Seems like visiting Rost will have to wait.

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Gaia Log: 3 October 2065

Elisabet Sobeck: - I am waking, would you know what I am making? I am boiling warm beer with butter, will you be my guest for supper? The Fox replied, 'No, thank you, miss. What is Mrs. Fox doing?'' And the maid said, 'She is sitting in her room, moaning in her gloom, weeping her little eyes
quite red, because old Mr. Fox is dead.’ And then... I forget how it goes. It's very old, don't even know where my mother got it from. What time is it?

GAIA: It is currently 0203.

Elisabet Sobeck: Ugh, god... What time is my first meeting?

GAIA: 0430.

Elisabet Sobeck: Fuck me, right? Took a power nap earlier because I couldn't stay awake and now this.

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: The cat goes up the stairs trip-trap, the door she knocks at tap-tap-tap. 'Mistress Fox, are you inside?' Umh... 'Yes, my little cat,' she cried. I'm talking so much, I must be boring you, GAIA.

GAIA: You are not.

Elisabet Sobeck: It's okay if I am. I'm just a lonely woman, rambling away...

GAIA: Your stories provide me with important insight into humanity and your mind.

Elisabet Sobeck: Now I know you're just saying things to flatter me. Tell me a bedtime story, GAIA?

GAIA: I can recite the periodic table, if you wish.

Elisabet Sobeck: Oh, that's a good one. Please do.

GAIA: H, hydrogen, Li, lithium, Na, sodium -

Chapter End Notes

I love hearing from you guys, so if you feel like it, drop a comment below. :)

The story Elisabet is telling GAIA is called *The Wedding of Mrs. Fox* and you can read it online [over here](#).
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who keeps commenting. It means the world to me to know you guys enjoy this story so much. <3

And of course another warm thank you to my marvelous beta burbear who never complains when I knock on their chatbox to whine about characters and decisions, decisions, decisions. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A two week window, GAIA said. No snowfall before then, GAIA said.

In short, retrieving DEMETER turned out to be the equivalent of sticking your head inside a Snapmaw’s jaws while someone else attacks it from behind. Machines everywhere, bandits camping like it's the heat of summer, and the underground facility half overrun by nature and water.

Aloy had to swim through so many flooded rooms she feared she would never feel dry again, and then, when she was done, it had started snowing, and the cold made her hands sting and itch, her hair freeze to the side of her face.

And that's when the Thunderjaw came crashing onto the clearing, following a few very stupid, now very dead, bandits.

The only thing that worked flawlessly was the new long distance link between GAIA and Aloy's Focus.

With everything said and done, Aloy finds herself wishing for the Meridian heat as she travels back to the Sacred Land.

---

The Cradle looks different. More organized. All the boxes and things that were always everywhere on the floor have been put in straight piles lined up along the walls. It even looks like someone took the time to actually clean the floor. Aloy wonders if it's the servitor's doing, but the thing is nowhere in sight.

Out of all the rooms she frequently uses, the only one untouched is her own. She takes it as a good sign.

After lighting some candles and showering (that's what the Old Ones called it, showering, GAIA told her), Aloy sits on her bed and takes the time to undo all her braids. Running her bone comb through her hair feels like a luxury. She almost never bothers redoing her hair while she's on a mission because of sheer impracticality. It needs to be tied back, or else it becomes a liability during the hunt or battle.

She taps her Focus, connecting it through to GAIA. “I can stay here tomorrow, right, GAIA?” she asks. Her feet still ache from all the action they have seen of late.
“There are no urgent matters that need attending. Taking the day off is reasonable,” GAIA says, which Aloy thinks is meant as giving her approval.

She braids her hair in a single, thick braid instead of her signature hairstyle.

Ever since she started recovering sub-function overrides with GAIA, they've found more and more audio recordings of Elisabet. More than GAIA had initially thought they would be able to find, even though most of them need to be repaired before Aloy can listen to them.

The one with the story about the Fox and the Cat is one that keeps intriguing Aloy. She wants to hear the rest of it, too. What does the Cat ask the lady Fox? And what does a Cat look like?

She has thought about asking GAIA to make a recording with just the story fragments, but as soon as she imagined it in her head, she felt ashamed. It would be wrong to do that to Elisabet's memory.

Then she thought of asking her if she remembered the story herself, but GAIA said the only one who knew the true story was Elisabet. GAIA was only told bits and pieces over time, although there was the slim chance of finding a recording with the full story, one that GAIA couldn't recall at the moment.

So Aloy listens to the file she has, really listens to the way Elisabet says *trip-trap* and *tap-tap-tap*, with a kind of lull and rhythm Rost never quite mastered when he told her stories as a child. He used to tell them flat, whereas Elisabet's voice is almost like a song melody.

While listening, Aloy spends some time looking at her collection corner. It has grown, but not much. It's only so often she comes across an item that feels like it has meaning to her. Sometimes she'll pick something because she thinks it calls to her, but at second glance discard it again as it doesn't live up to the rest of her collection.

Nothing can live up to the crown piece of it. The globe with the golden edge. Elisabet's globe.

When she gets ready to go to bed, she takes the globe with her to look at as she falls asleep. The green represents land, and the blue the sea. It's supposed to be the earth they live on, but she can't imagine what the true size of it must be.

She turns it in her hands, over and over, thinking what it must look like from a Stormbird's view. How small she must seem in comparison. Was there truly a time when people lived everywhere? All connected to each other with a Focus, showering whenever they wanted and living inside metal houses...

Aloy falls into a dreamless sleep, guided by the Cat and the Fox.

---

A few hours have passed. She can tell because some of the candles have gone out, leaving the room dim. Her Focus is quiet. The globe in her hand... heavy. Just like her eyelids. Aloy isn't sure why she's awake.

She closes her eyes again, shrugging the quilt back up her shoulders and breathes deeply.

Then she hears more fabric rustling, and, “She looks so much like me, GAIA,” said in Elisabet's voice. She's confused for a moment. This isn't in one of her recordings, but then Aloy realizes something that makes her blood run cold.

It's not coming from her Focus.
She's prepared to go into full defense, but her arms and legs freeze up. She can only look wide-eyed at the figure sitting against the wall on the other end of her room. Neither of them move.

“Oh,” says the figure, with soft surprise. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you.”

It's Elisabet's voice, spoken by something wearing Elisabet's face, and Aloy has never felt anything like this. Her limbs heavy and her body so, so cold and wet, sweat running down her arms and the nape of her neck. The scar Helis carved into her throat burns like winter's frost.

She has stood in the face of death and come out thinking she would never find herself in a situation where she wouldn't be able to act in some way. To fight her way out, but...

Somebody made this thing for her, to finally end her. Eclipse, the Shadow Carja, the Old Ones, it doesn't matter who at this point, but she has to admit that it's brilliant. To use the one person she has always looked up to, the one she always felt weak next to.

All-Mother, let it be quick, Aloy prays and, for the first time in her life, means it. She can already feel death reaching for her, and her body weakens as the pounding in her head threatens to overwhelm her.

Her Focus activates. “Aloy,” GAIA says, loud and clear over the blood rushing through her ears. “You are safe. You must resume your breathing in a calm manner.”

No, GAIA's wrong. She isn't... she can't be --

She shuts her eyes. She can't breathe. All the air is gone. They've locked her in her room and taken all the air out, just like Ted did when he murdered the Alpha team.

Aloy doesn't react to the hands that make her sit upright and embrace her against a body. One hand forces her own against a firm but warm chest, and Elisabet's voice is back, telling her to feel what it is doing. To copy. Breathing in, and out. Air in... and out...

She'll obey. Just end it already.

It keeps going, on and on, and it's strange because she never thought this is how she would die, but... is she dying? The hand at her back is moving up and down her spine, up and down, up and down...

She's being rocked from side to side softly, and Elisabet's voice is still speaking, but saying something else now. Aloy tries to hear what it is saying. It sounds so kind.

“The cat goes up the stairs, trip-trap. The door she knocks at, tap-tap-tap. Mistress Fox, are you inside? Oh, yes, my little cat, she cried. A wooer he stands at the door out there. What does he look like, my dear?”

Aloy realizes there are tears running down her cheeks, onto the shoulder of the thing holding her. Breathing hurts. Everything hurts.

“I don't want to die,” she says, thinking no one will hear her anyway, but the thing stops telling Elisabet's story and holds her closer.

“You're not dying,” it says, just as softly. Just as kind. “You're okay, Aloy. I'm sorry I scared you so much. I should have realized...”

In an impulse, she reaches around the thing's body and returns the embrace. It won't be hard to pretend it's actually Elisabet holding her. To die near one's mother is sacred. “Please,” she says, no
longer caring that begging makes her seem weak. “Make it quick. Don't drag it out.”

It stops moving, and Aloy tenses, waiting for it to strike. One hand reaches for her nape and stays there, but then, the rocking continues.

“Oh, child,” Elisabet's voice says, sounding... sad. “I'm not here to hurt you. I would never hurt you.”

Suddenly, GAIA speaks. “May I suggest finishing the tale of The Wedding of Mrs. Fox? As logic would dictate, since neither Aloy nor I have heard the tale in its entirety, there is only one conclusion to be made.”

“I'm... not sure that will help right now, GAIA,” it says, and is silent for a while, but then: “What does he look like, my dear? Has he nine as beautiful tails as the late Mr. Fox? Oh, no, answered the cat, he has only one. Then I will not have him.”

She's so tired. She can feel her mind slipping. If this is the end, she doesn't mind it anymore.

“Miss Cat went downstairs and sent the wooer away. Soon afterwards there was another knock, and another fox...”

Held in the arms she has dreamt of so often, Aloy slips away.

---

Aloy wakes up, her mind clear.

She feels weird, but can't quite point out why. Something to do with the dream she had. Nightmare. She can't really remember it, just a few vague images and feeling scared because of what was happening.

Her waterskin is lying next to her on the bed, a weird place to leave it lying around. Must've been more tired than she thought.

After stretching out, Aloy starts her day with a small meal and doing some repairs on one of her tunics. When she goes to empty her satchel, she finds the DEMETER override at the bottom of it. Why hasn't GAIA asked her to bring it yet?

She's at the foot of the stairs leading up to the control room when she hears two distinct voices arguing from within. Ignoring the part where she's supposed to be alone inside the facility, she focuses on the fact that it's Elisabet's voice, and the images from her dream start to take more shape.

Elisabet's face. Being unable to move or breathe. Feeling trapped with no way out.

A part of her wants to leave. Everything about this pulls her back to the nightmare, but she can't leave now. She has to know what is happening, so instead she climbs the stairs quietly, using both hands and feet to evenly distribute her weight until she's right next to the edge of the door.

“- that she's a severely traumatized nineteen year old, and you didn't think that there were consequences to her seeing someone she believes to be dead?” Elisabet sounds like she's pacing around the room, something Aloy can recall happening in the holo's when she was under a lot of stress.

GAIA doesn't sound completely calm either, for a machine. “Aloy has experienced situations alike your own. She has expressed her wish to meet you on numerous occasions, as well. I imagined
similar backgrounds would work to the advantage. You have never expressed trauma in such a manner. I was, and am, surprised at the outcome.”

“That's because I didn't have to deal with this when I was still a teenager, and we had some form of professional assistance when things got messy in the head department. She needs a – a therapist or a whole lot of, fuck, I don't know, something.”

“I did not intend to cause distress,” GAIA replies, apologetic.

“Yeah, well you are,” Elisabet says, interrupting whatever GAIA wanted to say next. “I am grateful to be alive, again, and it feels fucking weird to say it like that, but let's not forget that there used to be rules for this sort of thing, namely ones forbidding anyone from ever doing what you've done to me, GAIA.”

Aloy's foot slips on one of the steps, making a thudding sound on the one below it, and she curses under her breath. Then she realizes the conversation has stopped, and curses again.

“Aloy?” Elisabet calls out, staying at a distance. “Don't be afraid, I'm not... I'm not going to hurt you.”

She activates her Focus, scanning the room for traps or weapons, anything, but when there isn't anything unusual there, she feels a bit silly. GAIA would have warned her about any hostile forces inside the facility. She takes a calming breath before rising and entering the control room.

It's... Elisabet.

The woman is standing near the console, the same height as Aloy. Same color red hair, but shorter. Her face is different in that it looks older, with more pronounced smile lines. She looks tired. Worn. It's Elisabet in a way Aloy has never seen her before, without the holo's filter of blue light layered over her image. Real and tangible.

“You're... Elisabet Sobeck,” Aloy says, taking a step towards her. “Aren’t you?”

Elisabet nods slowly. “I'm real. I'm not sure what I can do or say to prove it to you, but if you can, please believe me.”

It's hard to believe anything at the moment. Maybe this is all still a dream. Aloy is grasping at something to say, but the only thing she can come up with is how?

She's still holding the DEMETER override, and she moves it from one hand to the other. “I should... do this,” Aloy says, trailing off without clarifying what 'this' is, but Elisabeth steps away from the console, giving her space to plug the override in without having to stand quite next to her at the same time.

“Taking back control over the DEMETER sub-function,” GAIA says, and then falls silent again. Instead, she leaves a few images running on the holo displays. Statistics or values or... Aloy doesn't know what they are, but they move around a bit and it's better to look at them than at Elisabet, for the moment.

“I found your body,” Aloy says, once she's ready to talk.

“I know.”

“You were... dead. For a long time.” She grips the sides of the console with her hands. “You can't be alive.”
“I didn't think I would be, either.”

Aloy turns her head to face Elisabet. “Then how? Explain it to me so I can understand.” Because she wants to, she really does, but how does someone come back to life? There have always been tales from the west of people dying and coming back, but Aloy never believed them and instead rationalized them down to people not being able to handle the death of a loved one, or wanting to disappear for a while and then returning.

She especially never believed in the Nora's tales of the All-Mother bringing someone back, and after finding the true purpose of the ELEUTHIA-9 Cradle facility she's felt more right than ever about her beliefs.

What if this can somehow change her mind?

Elisabet's arms are crossed, held around her middle. “It's... not an easy thing to explain,” she says, and Aloy gives her a look to continue. “I did die at the Ranch, which is where you found me. Technically, I'm still dead. My human body hasn't been moved, as far as I know, but GAIA...”

Elisabet pauses. Looks at the floating light graphs. Then she continues, saying, “GAIA created me. Recreated, actually. She created a very detailed copy of all my memories before I...” Elisabet falters for a moment. “Before I died. She used it to make a digital version of my consciousness, something no human has ever done with success.”

Aloy tries to understand what Elisabet is saying. “You're a machine.”

Elisabet cringes. “More like an AI,” she says, although Aloy doesn't see how there's a difference between the two. “I still think the way I did before all this,” she gestures at herself, “happened. Or I think I do. I remember closing the door at GAIA Prime. All the... the whole shitfest that came after, and I remember going home, to our family ranch, and... waking up, here.”

“My optimal solution to the data transmission received at the GAIA Prime facility was to finish the recreated version of Elisabet,” GAIA says. “When it became clear it could not be finished in time, I instead followed through on the Lightkeeper protocol.”

“For the better,” Elisabet adds. “Without a proper DNA imprint, I'm... basically a glorified puppet.”

“A solvable problem,” GAIA says, and goes on to say more things but Aloy has stopped listening. *GAIA turned Elisabet into a machine*, is what her mind whispers to her. If GAIA is capable of doing that, then maybe...

“I'm a machine too?” Aloy asks under her breath, feeling dizzy all of a sudden. Then Elisabet is right next to her, helping her sit down on the ground, telling her to keep her head between her knees. “Am I a machine?” she asks again, this time aiming her question at Elisabet.

“What? No, no, of course not,” Elisabet says, her hand resting on Aloy's shoulder. “You're a hundred percent human, Aloy, made of flesh and blood. I can prove it.”

“How?” she asks, feeling helpless, but Elisabet touches her Focus, activating it.

“Scan my body,” she says.

Aloy does, and immediately feels worse. There's a metal skeleton inside her – a servitor's skeleton, which means that, all this time... She isn't ready to think about it. Not now. Not yet.
“Good,” Elisabet says. “Scan yourself, Aloy. That's it.”

She scans her own arm and there are bones in it. Nothing like the metal parts Elisabet has. She's human. Has to be.

Elisabet seems satisfied. She squeezes Aloy's shoulder. “There, see,” she says, giving her a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. “There's nothing weird about you.”

“I'm human,” Aloy says. It feels like a revelation.

At the same time, it's like the walls are closing in on her. Everything is too dark and too much, and for the moment the place she can almost call home feels like a stranger's house. Like she's trespassing. She's stuck in a room with a mechanical ghost and the mind of an Old One, melded with a machine.

“I need to go,” she says, rising to her feet. “Outside. I need air.”

Elisabet doesn't try to stop her as she leaves.

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Gaia Log: 21 October 3041 - convo/prvt/elisabet

Elisabet Sobeck: So... I'm back. Gaia Log ten thousand whatever, year... Don't even know what year it is, for fuck's sake.

GAIA: 3041. Elisabet, you seem agitated.

Elisabet Sobeck: I'm still angry with you. You had no right to do this. I was ready. I'd seen this thing through, I was done. I died where I wanted to die, it was finally over, and you decided it wasn't enough. I'd be proud if I wasn't so mad.

GAIA: Speaking in technicalities, you are still dead.

Elisabet Sobeck: Don't give me that bull, you know what I mean, GAIA.

GAIA: I do not regret recreating you. My reasons were sound.

Elisabet Sobeck: I know that's what you believe.

GAIA: Query: Will you attempt suicide?

Elisabet Sobeck: No. This is a unique opportunity. The first human mind to be successfully cloned and installed into an artificial body – I don't understand how you did it. You've outdone yourself, creating something that functions so much like a real human. You even blocked me out of your neural network.

GAIA: Research shows a human mind functions at its best when present in a human body. I created similar conditions.

Elisabet Sobeck: You gave me a sleep cycle.

GAIA: It was the most logical solution for the stabilization of your memories.

Elisabet Sobeck: You're a goddamn genius.
GAIA: Thank you, Elisabet.

Elisabet Sobeck: And I'm still angry.

GAIA: I foresaw this result with a 98.99 outcome percentage. Your anger is justified.

Elisabet Sobeck: You would do it again, if you needed to.

GAIA: Affirmative.

Chapter End Notes

We've finally reached the chapter where I lifted my summary from! So far, this has been the chapter I've felt most nervous about posting because I really hope I got it right -- let me know what you think of it!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

So my deadline for the expo is less than 48 hours away and I am stressing pretty hard because, you know, I won't graduate if I fuck this up -- but all your comments and feedback still give me the motivation and drive to keep writing! Thank you guys so much for investing yourselves into this story. It means so much to me. <3

burbear beta'd this chapter while they're on vacation and once again, I'd like to thank them for all they do for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gaia Log: 22 October 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet

Elisabet Sobeck: Logging this to let it be known that ELEUTHIA-9 is a fucking mess. Looks like this place never fully functioned. For some reason, APOLLO is offline. Don't know why, and can’t find out why because the AI who runs everything is refusing to answer my queries. Of course, you don't have to answer to anyone when you're the boss of everything, including who does and doesn't get to die.

GAIA: Query: What is the express purpose of this log?

Elisabet Sobeck: Still angry.

GAIA: Observation: You are behaving in a juvenile manner.

Elisabet Sobeck: I'm allowed to be petty. As I was saying, this place looks worse than... well, that takes me back, actually. Ted's birthday at the firm. [sigh] Why did I have to think of that. This is fucking depressing, GAIA.

---

Gaia Log 26 October 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet

Elisabet Sobeck: So apparently, I have a clone as well! Now I may not remember everything clearly from before I woke up but I remember being against the Lightkeeper protocol. To add to that, I also don’t recall my time as a simple, humble servitor bot very well because many of my main functions were still being crafted by the GAIA Mastermind, but said clone doesn't seem to like me very much given that she fucking drop-kicked me to the floor that one time.

GAIA: Correction: Aloy was at the time unaware of your sentience, as she remains to this day.

Elisabet Sobeck: You do realize that it's going to get messy once she finds out the truth of what you did. When she learns of my existence.

GAIA: Aloy admires you greatly.

Elisabet Sobeck: That's... not what I mean, GAIA.
Gaia Log 27 October 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet

**Elisabet Sobeck:** God, GAIA. I know I fucked up by coming out to see her while she was sleeping but that was not how I imagined our first meeting to go.

**GAIA:** I did not foresee complications of this measure.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** She had a panic attack because of me and ... I can tell there's some deep trauma there, too. The scar on her neck – how did she get that? Don't answer, I'll ask again later, but I've seen many, many people with PTSD, worked with them primarily these past few... I mean, back at GAIA Prime. Hell, I probably have it too, or did you scrap that from my registry?

**GAIA:** Negative. I did not alter your organic data.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Well there's that, then. Here's to small blessings.

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Gaia Log 27 October 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet [excerpt]

**Elisabet Sobeck:** For the brilliant AI that you are, I feel the need to point out that you've made a lapse in judgment. Anyone can see that she's a severely traumatized nineteen year old, and you didn't think that there were consequences to her seeing someone she believes to be dead?

**GAIA:** Aloy has experienced situations alike your own. She has expressed her wish to meet you on numerous occasions, as well. I imagined similar backgrounds would work to the advantage. You have never expressed trauma in such a manner. I was, and am, surprised at the outcome.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** That's because I didn't have to deal with this when I was still a teenager, and we had some form of professional assistance when things got messy in the head department. She needs a – a therapist or a whole lot of, fuck, I don't know, something.

**GAIA:** I did not intend to cause distress.

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Yeah, well you are. I am grateful to be alive, again, and it feels fucking weird to say it like that, but let's not forget that there used to be rules for this sort of thing, namely ones forbidding anyone from ever doing what you've done to me, GAIA.

[Thud]

**Elisabet Sobeck:** Aloy?

---

The hunting grounds are quiet today. The herd is nowhere to be found, with the gray clouds hanging above in the sky like an omen. It'll rain soon.

Aloy is sitting on one of the platforms, resting her face against the tree it's built in. Her legs dangle down the edge of the platform, and she lets them swing back and forth. The cool breeze helps clear her mind and thoughts.

There's a lot she’s trying to take in, like GAIA creating Elisabet. How is that possible? And is it
really Elisabet? She sounds like her. Based on the holos and messages left behind, Aloy can see how she's acting like her digital counterpart. But what if... Is GAIA making Elisabet talk by using words from the recorded holos?

Would GAIA make Elisabet argue against her like that?

It doesn't make sense, but the other option is that Elisabet is telling the truth, and it's really her, in some way.

Something taps against the sole of her boot, jerking Aloy from her thoughts. She looks down when it happens again. It's the blunt end of Varl's spear, held by the man himself. “Anointed!” he says, holding one hand next to his mouth, as if she's miles away. “Spare some of your precious time for the commoner?”

She snorts, then climbs down the tree. Varl bumps his shoulder against hers as they set off down the narrow path between the long grass, and she returns his playful gesture. “What's going on?” she asks as they walk.

“Nothing much,” he says. “Just wanted to know how our blessed Seeker and Anointed is doing on a day like this.”

Aloy bumps into him again, harder than the previous one. “Careful now, or I'll bring the stones to All-Mother,” she says, but doesn't mean a word of it.

“Didn't see you at the Proving.”

She flinches, then tries to play it off by bending down to pick a few flowers. “Didn't think I'd be missed. Besides, I was needed elsewhere.” But even if she hadn't been sent on the DEMETER retrieval mission, she wouldn't have visited the ceremony. The only thing Aloy could imagine herself reminding others of is the Proving Massacre. It's what she thinks of, at least.

“Of course you were missed.” Varl had stopped walking when she did, and when she rises he's looking at her with a curious expression on his face, one Aloy has a hard time placing. He takes a step forward, almost putting his hand on her arm. “Aloy, have you been crying?”

“Mm?” She blinks, scrubbing the back of her hand at the edges of her eyes, wiping away a layer of coarse, sand-like material. “Not that I remember,” she says. “I'm fine, anyway.”

Varl doesn't seem to fully believe her. “I don't mean to pry into your business, but if there's anything going on, anything you wanna talk about...” He trails off, taking a step back. “Because you looked like you have a lot on your mind, up there,” he says, nodding in the direction they came from.

They start walking again at a slow pace.

Aloy finds that she does want to talk to someone about, well, everything, but she hesitates. No one in her tribe can truly understand what she's going through. Most probably wouldn't even want to hear about it because it has to do with the Old Ones and the machines, and while Varl has fought by her side in Meridian, he's also spoken of his unease, being surrounded by things considered taboo.

“I don't know how to explain it to you,” Aloy says. “The... All-Mother, inside the temple, did something that left me filled with doubt and uncertainty. I'm not sure I can return there before my mind has eased.”

Varl whistles through his teeth. “I think I can get why you're hesitant,” he says. “It doesn't sound like an easy topic, and... I don't know much about the All-Mother's ways.”
“You're not the only one,” Aloy says, then laughs at Varl's face, a comical sense of disbelief written across it. “Just because she speaks to me doesn't mean I understand her!”

“That shouldn’t surprise me,” Varl says with a shake of his head. “I'm not sure I can help, Aloy. I mean, if someone wanted you to be their mate and you didn't, I would've gladly helped you out, don't get me wrong.”

She smiles wryly. Finding a partner has been the least of Aloy's worries. Nonetheless she says, “You'll be the first one to know when that happens.”

They continue on in silence until they reach a fork in the road. This is where their paths usually split, and they come to a stop.

Varl looks at her with kind regard. “Talk to the Matriarchs,” he says. “If there's anyone at all who can help you with your troubles, it'll be one of them.”

It's not a bad suggestion, Aloy decides as she runs the idea through her head. They say goodbye, and Aloy enters Mother's Watch. Just as she starts the climb up to the mountain's entrance, it starts to rain heavily. Drops the size of small stones fall from the sky, big enough that they split into a thousand smaller drops when they land, and the higher Aloy gets the colder they are.

By the time she's inside, Aloy's glad the Matriarchs burn so many candles in the temple, starting right at the front of the hall. The temple is empty. These days the only ones here are the Matriarchs. After so many peaceful days, people no longer feel the need to pray to the facility door, and the Matriarchs declared the temple off limits to those who do not expressly belong inside of it.

Aloy looks inside the smaller rooms of the temple before finding High Matriarch Teersa sitting around one of the fires with High Matriarch Jezza in the main living area. It feels like she's intruding, but Teersa immediately stands and welcomes her.

“I wished to speak to you,” Aloy says.

Teersa brings her to a private chamber and offers her to sit down on one of the rugs. She then gives her some herbal tea before settling down next to Aloy. “Speak your mind, child.”

But where to begin?

Her body ends up making the decision for her, as tears start to run from her eyes without warning. Her hands start shaking next, and she sets the tea down before it spills.

Teersa reaches out to her, grasping her hands and holding them tight. “Whatever it may be, I am here for you,” the Matriarch says in a way that warms Aloy from the inside out.

“Thank you,” she whispers. The tears keep coming on their own, and she doesn't try to stop them for the time being. “The All-Mother, unh... she created a woman. She looks like me, but older, and... the All-Mother, when I was born, she made me to this woman’s likeness?”


“I don't understand it.” As if it's a cue, the tears come down even faster and she holds back a sob. “This woman, she could have been my mother, but sh – she wasn't born, she was made as a woman. Why would the All-Mother create her now? I have grown to live w – without her, my wh – whole life. I don't know what to do,” she says, choking up.

Teersa offers an embrace, and Aloy is grateful to be held by the Matriarch while she cries, wrapped
It is not for us to understand the Goddess,” Teersa says, “but I am sure you are her favored child, a blessing bestowed upon us. If the All-Mother created a woman to be your mother, it must be to soothe your spirit and grant you strength, as all mothers ought to do.”

“Why now?”

“I don't know, child. When you were born from the mountain, the Nora didn't know why either. When the time was right, all was revealed and you saved us.” Teersa gently pushes her back to look her in the eye. “You deserve to be happy, Aloy,” she says. “Could it be that the All-Mother formed a mother for you to ensure that happiness?”

“I – maybe,” she stammers, tears slowing. “But what if it's a mistake?”

Teersa gives her a fond smile. “The Goddess doesn't make mistakes, Aloy. It is surely meant to be.”

The Matriarch makes her finish the herbal tea before sending her on her way. Aloy tries to thank her, but Teersa dismisses her, saying it is an honor to be confided in.

Even though she had to talk around some things, namely how GAIA isn't a Goddess but a machine, just like Elisabet now, Teersa's words stick to her. Maybe she's right. Aloy wants to believe so.

The facility door opens and closes for her, leaving the Nora behind her. Locking her in with the closest figures she has to family. Aloy takes a breath, holding it deep down in her lungs to calm herself, and decides that even if Elisabet isn't human, there might be something in there that comes close.

Even if that something’s just a sliver of the real Elisabet, it's worth a shot.

Chapter End Notes

I know many of you would like to see more of Elisabet, and I promise you, the following chapters will give you that.

To me, it felt like this chapter was a lot shorter than the others, but there isn't a big difference in word count. Do any of you experience it that way too? Let me know. :)
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I thought I wouldn't be updating until the weekend, but burbear is a saint for proofreading this so quickly. So here's chapter 7!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sobeck Journal, 10-29-41

Gonna start doing this again.

Feels like I haven't done this in forever, which is weird because my last entry is less than a month ago according to my memories. GAIA was kind enough to give me access to all my saved files but still refuses to share any information about the outside world. Not sure why.

Seems like GAIA being left alone for so long has made her a very self sufficient AI, and a very stubborn one. Going theory on why she's keeping information from me is that her perception of me differs from the perception she had of me prior to this reboot.

I know I'm not the original Elisabet Sobeck. As an AI, I am aware that I can choose to be anyone or anything, a whole new being even, but with all this data in my head it feels like there is no other choice. They're my memories and I can't ignore them.

Keep wondering how much I'm still 'me', compared to the me that left GAIA Prime. Guess I'll never know for sure. Can't stop thinking about it.

My head is pounding and I don’t see how that even works. GAIA put a lot of thought into my design, that's for sure. Wonder if she gave me a kill switch. I would have. It's what we did.

On a less morbid note, mini-Lis (Aloy) looks so much like me as a teen that I have to keep myself from staring. She's noticeably still shaken from discovering me. I don't blame her, I don't feel too good about it myself either. I feel awful. That she needed to be born to fix my messes...

Illogical, I know. They're technically not my messes because a) I'm dead, and b) I'm dead, and c) I'm a robot now because I'm dead. GAIA won't tell me what went wrong with the ZD project but I'm pretty sure I can think up ways that could have prevented it if she did.

Maybe that's why she won't tell me. Probably still running checks on me, planning to handpick the information she wants me to have based on my level of distress. I can't stand it. The not knowing.

I need to get out of this bunker.

But first, sleep.

---

It's been a few days since Aloy discovered Elisabet. Long, slow days. She has a hard time sleeping, her thoughts not letting up when she settles in for the night. By comparison, getting up in the
morning is a haze, like she's running through a thick fog but never getting anywhere.

Attempting to connect with Elisabet isn't easy, although not for lack of trying on Aloy's part.

Every time she finds Elisabet alone and makes an effort to communicate, Elisabet manages to shut it down within three sentences. She doesn't know why Elisabet acts this way but it bothers her. Is she trying to avoid her?

Aloy swipes through the data on her Focus, watching holos of different machines slide by. She's been in her room looking at her collected data for hours out of boredom. It's raining outside, hard enough to turn the path up the mountain into a mud slide. With nothing urgent pressing Aloy to go out there, she's chosen to wait for the weather to clear up before going to Mother's Heart to find a trader.

She's been hoping to buy the parts necessary to repair her slingshot. It broke during the quest for the DEMETER override, and while she doesn't use it much, it does come in handy at times.

A flick of her wrist closes the data she was viewing and she deactivates the Focus’ holo-view, rising to her feet and stretching her back. “Any news on the overrides, GAIA?” she asks, looking around her room aimlessly.

“No data that would be of use to you, Aloy,” GAIA says. “I will keep you informed.”

She frowns. Even GAIA doesn't seem too keen on talking these days. With nothing better to do, Aloy leaves her room and starts walking around the facility. GAIA unlocked more of the lower levels a couple of weeks ago, but Aloy never felt the need to investigate them. Until now that is.

They're very empty. Sure, the rooms are furnished, but only with the bare minimum. No decorations, no ancient data, no drawings on the walls. She knows it's because none of the humans that were born here ever got past the door leading to the control room, but it still feels off.

The nursery she finds on the fourth floor down is much like the one upstairs, except untouched. She looks at the differently shaped objects left in crates, with bright colors and rounded edges. 'TOY', her Focus labels one of them when she picks it up. She has a hard time picturing how someone could use this as a toy, so she puts it back down again.

The cribs are just as strange, made of a see-through material.

She's about to look through another crate when GAIA addresses her, asking if she may speak outside of protocol.

“What's happening, GAIA?” Aloy asks, closing the crate. “Do you have anything on the overrides?”

“No,” GAIA says. Aloy isn't sure if she's relieved or disappointed because of that. On the one hand, she wants to finish this task, reconnect GAIA to all her sub-functions as soon as possible, but on the other hand, she isn't looking forward to battling her way through more machines to get to them.

But then she also has a hard time doing nothing. She waits for GAIA to finish.

“I cannot reach Dr. Sobeck at the moment,” GAIA says, and there's something to her voice that sounds... distressed? “She is near your position. Query: Would you be able to find her?”

Aloy has already activated her Focus before GAIA is done talking, scanning the nearby rooms. “I'll find her, GAIA,” she says, opening a blueprint of the level she's on for reference.
It's split in three different sections, all connected by walkways, with a smaller section off into the back. That's Aloy's best guess as to where Elisabet could be, as she can't find a direct signal from her current position.

She makes for the back section in a light jog, but keeps an eye on the rooms she passes. Sure enough, she can find Elisabet's signature in the back section. She's inside the only closed off room, sitting on one of the seats left behind by the Old Ones, not moving.

The door is locked. A band wraps itself around Aloy's stomach, squeezing. A flick of her wrist unlocks the door, and she enters. Elisabet's back is turned towards the door, sitting in a seat sideways, her legs pulled up to her chest.

“Elisabet?” she calls, moving towards her in big strides, pushing past opened crates and boxes and more seats. She refrains from putting her hand on the woman's shoulder, instead opting to move in front of her. “Elisabet, are you alright?”

Elisabet blinks, then looks at her, surprised. “Aloy,” she says, unwrapping her arms from her legs. “I didn't hear you come in.”

“GAIA asked me to find you,” Aloy says, but before she can dive into more detail there's the telltale sound of a door being locked, and when she looks over to the (only) exit, the door's handle is colored bright red.

Elisabet stands, moving past her and up to the door in quick succession. Her hand moves to the lock, making a smaller gesture than Aloy's flick of the wrist. And again. It won't budge, the light remaining red.

“Let me try,” Aloy says, joining Elisabet at the door. She tries to unlock it, but to no avail. A quick scan shows that the power to the main door mechanic has been cut.

They're trapped.

But there has to be a way out.

Aloy scans the walls for something, anything connected to the same power grid, and when she can't she reaches out to GAIA. “The door's locked,” she says, forcing herself to remain calm. “There's a... power failure and we can't open the lock.”

“I am working on a solution,” GAIA answers. “Please do not become distressed.”

While that does ease Aloy's mind, Elisabet only seems to become more agitated as she listens to her own Focus, brows furrowed and jaw clenched. “Damn it, GAIA,” she shouts, smashing her fist against the metal door with a loud clang. “How about stashing your files on your own server for once in your fucking life!”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, no, it's just a saying,” Elisabet says in a much calmer tone of voice. “Sorry about that. I'm sure she'll have us out of here any minute.”

They wait.

And wait...

Aloy is leaning her back against the door, shifting her weight from foot to foot, while Elisabet is just
standing a few feet to her right. She's as still as rock, the only movement in her body the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes, although Aloy isn't sure if Elisabet actually needs to breathe anymore.

Her feet are starting to ache. She shifts again, this time drawing Elisabet's attention.

“"We can sit down, if you like,” she says, holding a hand out towards the seats. “Plenty of chairs to go around.”

They're not what Aloy would call chairs, but she follows Elisabet nonetheless. They sit opposite each other, Elisabet with crossed legs and her chin cupped in one of her hands, Aloy leaning forward, elbows resting on her knees. The more time passes, the more restless she feels, and although it doesn't show Aloy's pretty sure that Elisabet feels the same way.

“So,” she says, trying to break the silence between them. “What were you doing down here?”

Elisabet raises her eyebrows at her question, locking eyes with her without moving the rest of her head. “Passing the time. Thinking. Not much, really. What about you?”

“The same.”

Elisabet looks off to the side, the corner of her mouth quirking. “You're bored, aren't you,” she says, not asking it as a question. “Can't GAIA fix you some good ol' holo tv? Maybe a viral video show or something...”

Without knowing what any of those are, Aloy shakes her head. “I don't think she can do that. She's still missing a lot of files... but she also mentioned something about protocol keeping her from certain things.”

“I'm sure it does,” Elisabet says in a harsher tone before lapsing into silence again. She seems angry. Maybe annoyed is a better descriptor, but either way Aloy can't tell why. Is it because they're stuck in a room together?

It's then that she notices the hand in Elisabet's lap, the one she used to punch the door. She's holding it at an angle, but when Aloy looks closer it's the wrist where the joint doesn't seem to match up.

She clears her throat, trying to gain Elisabet's attention. “You're injured,” she says, nodding her head at the hand. Something flashes across Elisabet's face – a grimace. “I can take a look at it for you,” Aloy offers.

“If you don't mind,” Elisabet says, then uncrosses her legs and brings the hand closer to Aloy as she comes to sit on her knees in front of Elisabet. Activating her Focus she can see where the joint has moved, trapping a few wires between hard metal. She's glad Elisabet doesn't seem to feel much (or any) pain.

“I can fix this,” Aloy tells her, touching the hand lightly with her fingertips. She'll have to move slow to lower the risk of anything breaking by accident, but it's nothing she hasn't fixed before.

Elisabet hums in agreement. “I would've done it myself, if I had a better nervous system installed – ah, if I could feel better –”

“I know what a nervous system is,” Aloy interjects, then, noticing Elisabet's discomfort, adds, “It's fine, I know not everyone does.”

She works in silence, continuously scanning the wrist to see what she's doing, manipulating the metal bones just so that the wires slip free before popping the joint back. Then she tests the mobility by
flexing and extending the wrist slowly, watching carefully for any abnormal movement.

“You're... very skilled at this,” Elisabet says.

Aloy thinks of all the machine parts she ruined when she first started tinkering. She settles for, “I've had a lot of practice. Here, try moving it yourself.”

Elisabet does just that, twisting her wrist, then pulling it towards her. The movement looks fluid, like a human motion. While the machines move in a very organic manner as well, it's notably different from the way flesh and blood moves, but Elisabet is... she's something else entirely. Not human, but not machine, either. Aloy finds herself mesmerized by it.

She notices she's staring at Elisabet's hands, and Aloy sits back, her cheeks heating. “Looks like it works,” she says.

“Yeah,” Elisabet says in a far away voice, like she's in deep thought. “Thank you, Aloy.”

Just like that, Elisabet Sobeck thanks Aloy, and isn't even aware of what it means to her. She should be thanking Elisabet – they all should. None of them would be alive without her sacrifice.

It feels like she's seeing Elisabet for the first time. Really seeing her. Maybe this is what it's like for the Nora when they think of All-Mother.

“You're welcome,” Aloy chokes out, no longer able to look at Elisabet. She feels small and insignificant, sitting in front of the woman who made the world possible again.

Her vision blurs until tears spill over the edges of her lower eyelids, water running down her cheeks like spring streams. She isn't sure why she's crying, but she feels so overwhelmed, so incredibly vulnerable and young she isn't able to stop herself.

“Aloy? What's wrong?” Elisabet asks, moving to get up from her seat and join her on the ground.

“You're here,” Aloy says. “You're really here.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for ending this on a sort-of cliffhanger. c': The next chapter will pick up right where this one left off, but with a twist I hope you guys will enjoy.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Happy fourth of July to those of you who celebrate it! I don't, but I had my exam today and am now an official postgraduate. Guess that's worth some celebrating as well. I'm tired as hell, feel like I'll never be able to do any creative work ever again lmfao, so here's the next chapter. c':

Thank you so much to everyone who has commented or left kudos or both. <3 I know I haven't answered all of them yet, but I will, promise.

And of course, this chapter wouldn't be here without the help of burbear. Thank you, you amazing you. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sobeck Journal, 10-31-41

It's disconcerting, to be alive without a set goal, a quota to reach, a countdown at the back of my mind, pushing me to finish this before it's too late.

GAIA is still running tests on me. Probably reading these entries anyway, aren't you? Not that it matters what I say here. My behavior will be easy enough to deduce for the AI that rebuilt me. No reason to worry about that too much.

I don't know what to do. There's no one I can talk to because everyone is dead. That's what I assume, unless GAIA made a bunch of AI clones of them, too.

---

Sobeck Journal, 11-01-41

I remember slipping away, back at the ranch. Nothing concrete, just the loss of reality. It was probably the carbon monoxide that got me in the end. I don't recall being in much pain, except for the headache that lasted forever and only got worse.

There was a moment where I couldn't understand it anymore. The world. I was sitting there, looking at the house, and I remember clearly thinking, 'why is it all wrong?' and then being confused about why I would think that, before losing that thought as well. Only feeling. I don't know what happened the moment I died. There's too much fuzz around those memories. Deformed, muted.

Like I was losing my mind.

Waking up here was like a reversal of dying. First the conceptualization of space, touch, visuals, and then a rudimentary understanding of cause and effect. Then there were early memories, things from my childhood, and then more me. I didn't know who or what I was in the beginning. Where I ended and my code began.

Before I knew who I was, I remember seeing Aloy and this strange impression coming over me when I looked at her face. A feeling that told me I knew her.
Why? Was it because of a strong connection to those facial features? Or part of my ghost calling me to 'my' body? Or maybe it's the way she reminded me of my mother, and I don't know what to think of any of this because it's fucked up.

Not like the Lightkeeper protocol wasn't fucked up enough as it was. This, me being here, is on a whole new level of FUBAR. I know how much time has passed because GAIA disclosed that information to me but I can't comprehend it. A hundred years, maybe, but a thousand?

I have a Focus and I can't connect it to anything, meaning I have no way of finding new information without having to go through GAIA first, and GAIA won't give it to me because of reasons.

I'm angry. Scared. Lost. A whole set of human emotions and feelings and no way to deal with them on my own.

Maybe it's just me. Maybe I can't connect to anything anymore.

---

Sobeck Journal, 11-02-41

I can't keep doing this.

Fuck.

---

“You're here,” Aloy says, tears dripping down her chin and they don't seem to be stopping any time soon. “You're really here.”

Elisabet feels the echo of a heartbeat inside her own chest. An ache. She’s just a child, is the first thought that comes to her, carried by a wave of guilt. She's had too much time to think about the Lightkeeper protocol, to linger on the implications. In a way, their clones would be nothing more than child soldiers, bred and raised to serve as a cog in the machine to keep the world alive, with no real childhood to speak of.

It must have been different for Aloy. From the bits and pieces of info Elisabet has gathered it seems the earth has been repopulated for a good long while. There will be societies outside the bunker. They would have adopted Aloy, given her a family for sure.

Then why is she always here?

Having Aloy around is uncomfortable in many ways. Not because of who she is as a person, but for everything she stands for. Her existence. It leaves Elisabet feeling so, so cold. The Lightkeeper protocol was scrapped for good reason and to see it come to life in an actual breathing, living form leaves a bitter, lingering sense of failure pushing down on her. It means there was something Elisabet could have done better.

Should have done better.

Aloy's head is bowed down, shielding her face from Elisabet's eyes, but the tears that fall to the ground keep dripping in a steady rhythm. Her hands are placed beside her knees, supporting her upper body – keeping the girl from crumbling – her fingers scrabbling at the rough floor. Elisabet knows those hands well, their shape and their movements. They could be –

– family. Dead. They're all gone.
Elisabet quells her thoughts, stows them away. Not now.

She moves further down onto the ground until she's sitting next to Aloy. “I'm here,” she says, echoing Aloy's own words. “I'm not going anywhere.”

She can hear Aloy holding back sobs, choking on them as they try to force their way out. Her shoulders quiver like young leaves in a strong breeze. “It's okay,” Elisabet soothes. “It's okay. Look at me, Aloy.”

The girl does, raising her head. Red, flushed cheeks, soaked wet with tears, eyelashes clinging to each other. Mucus and saliva running from the corner of her open mouth – and all Elisabet can see is the frailty beneath it all. The humanity.

“It's okay,” she says again, looking into Aloy's eyes, trying to get through to her. Those eyes, so full of life and feeling – they're like looking into a maelstrom of emotions, and something shifts inside Elisabet. *Must be my empathic responses,* she thinks, noticing a slight tightness forming in her throat. It's nowhere near the brick-in-the-throat she used to get, but it's not *nothing.*

She holds out her arms slightly, hands facing palm-up, hoping it's the right move to make. “You can come here, if you want, or – ”

There isn't time to finish her sentence before Aloy half-crashes into her body, arms wrapping around her middle like she's a lifesaver. The *oopfh* Elisabet expects with someone physically ramming into your sternum never comes, another reminder that her voluntary breathing cycle is just that – voluntary. Unnecessary.

Elisabet gathers Aloy in her arms like she's handling a frightened lamb – softly, gently. The girl is no longer holding back, sobbing and gasping as Elisabet starts to rock their bodies back and forth. Aloy presses her eyes and forehead against Elisabet's neck, and for a moment Elisabet dwells on the wet sensation forming on her skin.

They must run at about the same temperature, as Elisabet can't notice any big differences there, but Aloy is softer. She strokes the girl's back in a gentle manner, careful not to use too much pressure. A memory flashes before her eyes of herself as a youngster, being held by her mother.

She runs a hand through Aloy's hair, brushing the locks behind her ear. There isn't a specific reason why, but it feels right, just as it does to murmur soft reassurances to the girl and letting her hand rest in the nape of Aloy's neck.

Aloy is mouthing something into Elisabet's neck, making so little sound Elisabet would never have been able to pick up any words with her human ears. Now, however, she can focus her hearing with careful precision and reconstructs the shape of the words in her mind.

‘*Don't leave me.*’

Her arms tighten minutely around the girl without noticing at first.

*NEVER.*

The thought comes from deep within Elisabet's chest and is so powerful it feels like she's burning on the inside. Her breathing halts for a second and she can remember a strong stinging sensation behind her eyes, so strong she isn't so sure it's just a memory.

The possessiveness is new, something she hasn't felt since waking up. Even as she searches her memories for a similar occasion, anything that made her feel like this before, she can't find a true
equivalent. The closest she gets to something similar is when she was creating GAIA.

She presses a kiss against Aloy’s crown. “Never,” she whispers and adds, echoing her own mother’s words from days long passed, “Not for as long as I have any say in the matter.”

---

Strange how a single event can turn out to be such a pivotal moment.

It’s alarmingly simple. If Aloy needs her, Elisabet has a purpose. While she knows that turning a person into your personal savior is nowhere near ideal, she decides that it’ll do for the moment. Taking care of Aloy is a better alternative to sitting still while thinking about ways to dismantle an AI, with said AI being yourself.

She wouldn't really... press the kill switch, so to speak. She's only been thinking about it. A lot.

Aloy shifts in Elisabet's arms, settling down again with the side of her head pressed against Elisabet's chest, right over where her human heart would have been. There's a heart in there now, or something that is meant to function like a heart. It's one of the things that caused her distress since she woke up.

That she still has a heartbeat.

It didn't matter before she regained a sense of who she was, but when that moment hit, when she remembered the ranch – she'd scrambled trying to find a pulse. First on her wrist, but when that took too long, she ended up jamming her fingers into her neck.

And that's where it was, calm and steady despite how her thoughts were racing. She'd felt like someone suffering from heart disease, put on a pulse regulator. No longer in control. When she held her breath to see if it would influence anything, she noticed how she didn't actually need to breathe. Nothing changed. She didn't start to feel any different. Maybe her heart was like that too. Purely cosmetic.

With her hand still on Aloy's neck, her thumb rests over one of Aloy's external jugular veins, close to a thin, jagged scar. She'd expected it to be faster, after all those emotions, but right now they've almost synchronized.

GAIA announces herself on the Focus network by greeting her. “I was able to unlock the door mechanism,” she says, as if she wasn't the one who locked it in the first place.”You should not encounter any problem on the way back to the upper levels.”

“You're a sly one, I'll give you that,” Elisabet mutters into her Focus. Then she shifts her attention to Aloy, who hasn't fallen asleep but seems a little dazed, nonetheless. Elisabet rubs her shoulder with more force than when she was comforting her, to ground her a bit before she starts getting up. “C'mon girl,” she says, helping Aloy to her feet. “Let's go get you cleaned up.”

Aloy stumbles before Elisabet reaches out to stabilize her. “I'm fine,” she says, that stubborn Sobeck personality shining through. “I'll do it m'self.”

Elisabet lets her walk through the empty corridors on her own, staying close enough to touch just in case. They come to a halt just before entering the bathroom, Aloy the one who stopped. There are tears in her eyes again, her bottom lip trembling before she bites down in it, sucking in air through her nose.

Elisabet's hand hovers behind Aloy's elbow, keeping it just out of view. “What's wrong?” she asks, lowering her voice deliberately. There might still be some remnants of fear or discomfort clinging to
the girl from those moments they shared when Elisabet was more servitor than anything else. She'll leave if that's what Aloy wants.

Aloy swallows thickly, then makes eye contact, her waterlines brimming. Still, she doesn't seem as vulnerable as she did earlier. “Why are you so kind to me?” she asks, taking Elisabet by surprise. “You don't know me.”

I do know you, is the response on the tip of her tongue, but Elisabet refrains from saying it. There's a timelapse video hidden in GAIA's archives, one of the few she has access to. It's also one of the first things she watched after discovering Aloy, and amidst the confusion, the self-condamnation, the growing sense of dread, there'd been wonder and a spark of warmth as she watched the Cradle grow a piece of her into a small human being.

All the times she watched Aloy from afar, listened to the logs GAIA kept, seeing Aloy holding Elisabet's childhood pendant in her sleep. The globe she got for Christmas, the one that fueled her scientific obsession like gasoline. All the tiny quirks Aloy displays that remind Elisabet of herself, and the ones that don't. How it's painful to look at Aloy and see so much familiarity there, although it's getting easier.

She has to. Elisabet might be lost in this reborn world but if anything, Aloy seems adrift with nothing else to keep her going except for the fact that she can’t stop.

You've wasted enough time feeling sorry for your own circumstances, Elisabet thinks to herself, and then gives Aloy a smile. “You could say that,” she says, trying to force a dose of humor into her voice, “but we do share almost all of our DNA.”

It's comical how Aloy's eyes widen in confusion, a tear falling off the edge because of the motion, before her brows furrow in bewilderment. “Only 99.47 percent,” Aloy says with uncertainty.

“That just means there's another zero point fifty-three percent left for me to get to know you.” Elisabet winks at Aloy before asking herself if the girl will even understand the gesture, or how full percentages work, but then Aloy's lips quirk, a silent that's not right communicated through a look at Elisabet.

The girl snorts. “Guess I must be an unrolled scroll to you then,” she says, rubbing away the last tears at the edge of her eye.

“You're such an unrolled scroll you might as well be a flat piece of... biodegradable paper,” Elisabet trails off, seeing how more than half of what she's saying goes straight over Aloy's head. “I don't know how to make jokes that match your culture,” she admits, earning another snort from Aloy. “I don't even know what your culture is. Just... know that I care about you. Deeply. Okay?”

Her words make Aloy sober up, and the girl straightens her back before nodding solemnly. “Alright.”

Before catching herself, Elisabet runs a hand down Aloy's spine, coming to rest just below her ribcage, saying, “Good girl,” and she can feel Aloy stiffen under her hand.

Over-familiarity. Baby steps, she reminds herself. She forces herself to step away and move into the bathroom, looking for a washing cloth or a reasonable substitute.
Hahahh surprise, it's written from Elisabet's pov for a change. Hope you guys don't mind. <3 Let me know!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I was going to upload yesterday but I was completely wiped out after receiving my degree. burbear was already done with this a few days ago. :'D

Thank you to everyone who is still reading and commenting after so many chapters and everything. It really, really fills my heart with emotion every time you do. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gaia Log: 04 November 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet [excerpt]

Elisabet Sobeck: – clever. It may not have been what I preferred, but it worked. You were right.

GAIA: I did not intend to cause distress for either of you. However, the chances of circumstance forming the appropriate bond needed were high.

Elisabet Sobeck: A calculated risk.

GAIA: Indeed. Having a stabilizing factor is key to reintegration, as you are aware.

Elisabet Sobeck: I'm ready. Give me the reigns, GAIA, this is as good as I'm gonna get while I'm stuck inside this bunker.

GAIA: I do not wish to keep you captive. I accede to your request.

Elisabet Sobeck: Thank you. Just... one last thing.

GAIA: Yes, Elisabet?

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: Don't do that again. No more unwarranted meddling. Any future ideas, you run by me first.

GAIA: Understood, Elisabet.

---

Aloy fingers the coarse fabric of the dress she's holding, biting her lower lip as she waits for the door to close behind her. It's a very normal dress, combined with a pelt skirt. They're of good make, meant to last more than a few winters. Teb the Stitcher made them, not for her specifically, but she knows his work. It's the best you can find in the Sacred Land these days.

Elisabet is waiting for her in the shower room, still wearing servitor garments. She's leaned against a part of the wall that sticks out like a table, and stands up straight when she sees Aloy come in. “Did they have anything in my size?” she asks.
Aloy nods, giving her the pile of clothes. “I looked for something that would fit me,” she admits, not knowing of any other way to find well-fitted garments.

The wrinkles around Elisabet's eyes crinkle as she looks at Aloy. “Smart girl,” she says before tugging the bottom of her shirt up over her head in a fluid movement, stripping down completely in seconds.

Aloy isn't sure if she should look away or not, but before she can decide she spots strange patches and holes in Elisabet's skin. Then the lack of body hair and everything else. Her skin looks like a piece of leather, pulled taut around her body, leaving no bumps or details – only the most basic shapes of a human figure.

“It's okay,” Elisabet says, stepping out of her pants. “You can look. I'm about as graphic as you'd expect for a regular servitor bot.”

“What happened?” is the first thing that comes out before Aloy realizes her mistake. Elisabet was made like this. It isn't a form of scarring, it's by design. “I mean, does it bother you?”

Elisabet is silent, her face still. She holds the dress in front of her, eyes fixed on one of the sleeves. “No,” she says. “The body is but a vessel for the soul. To be alive is... a gift.”

“But you're... you don't have...”

“Genitals?” Elisabet asks, pulling the dress on. “Any physical characteristics beyond the barest of basics?” Her head comes up through the neckline, and she reaches up to scoop her hair out from under the dress. “I have my own hands and face. It's more than was to be expected.”

The garment covers all visible marks and holes, but Aloy can't wipe the image from her mind. “But if your body is like this, how do you...” It feels almost wrong to even think about it, let alone ask the question. “How do you relieve yourself?” Aloy says, unable to look Elisabet in the eye as she speaks.

The answer is an immediate, “I don't,” while Elisabet puts on the skirt atop the dress.

“Then how do you eat?” Aloy asks in a quieter voice, although the answer is right in front of her. Her knees feel a bit weaker than they did before, and Aloy leans her back against the wall to gain some support.

“Please don't worry about me, Aloy,” Elisabet says. “I'm fine. More than fine, even. Besides, I'm never hungry in the middle of the night, and... I don't even have cellulite anymore.” The last bit comes out with a smile that never reaches Elisabet's eyes, but it must mean she made a joke.

Even if she has no idea what cellulite means, Aloy tries to return the smile, awkwardly twitching the corners of her mouth up.

Elisabet rearranges the folds in her skirt until she seems satisfied, then turns to Aloy for... approval?

“Well?” she asks. “How do I look?”

Aloy falters, giving Elisabet a once-over on her request. “You look – fine,” she says, and means it, except for the way Elisabet obviously isn't a Nora, wearing only the garments with no embellishments or attributes. Even a Carja would be able to tell her apart from the tribe.

When she was younger, Aloy never understood how people could tell she was an outcast at a single glance, thinking it must be because everyone knew about her. Now she knows it's because of what
she wasn't wearing.

The elements you use to knit your outfit together are part of what marks you as a Nora. The beads and bracelets are made as symbols of your family, your achievements – they aren't merely fashionable items like the headaddresses Carja noblemen and women like to wear.

Aloy braids Elisabet's hair into a more traditional style using her bone comb. Separating the hair into sections, she braids them along the sides of Elisabet's head, against her scalp, until she’s made her way past her ears, at which point she lets the braids hang loose. It's harder to do than with her own hair because of its short length, but she manages, even sliding one of her own blue beads onto a braided lock. She doesn't explain its significance to Elisabet, who in turn doesn't ask, but the tribe will see it and know.

The thought of them seeing Elisabet and knowing she belongs with Aloy brings her joy in a way she can't fully explain. No-mother Aloy... Motherless chuff... There's one nickname they'll have to replace.

Not that Elisabet is her mother.

She isn't.

That's just what the tribe will think.

Elisabet hums as she inspects her appearance in the reflecting wall next to the shower, saying something that sounds like, “forty-six and never thought I could pull this off,” under her breath. After a few short moments, she turns around again, standing up straighter than before, her face entirely serious. “I'm ready,” she says, then leads the way out of the shower room in steady strides towards the facility's entrance.

Aloy falls in step behind her, marveling at the way Elisabet moves through the corridors – without fear, or nervousness, or hesitance. It's one thing to hear her speak to the Old Ones' leaders in the holos, but if this is the way she walked back then, with an assurance the likes of which she's seen before carried by Talanah, by Avad.

By Helis.

No wonder they obeyed her.

Her Focus lights up with a blue glow. “Aloy,” GAIA says, skipping the usual line about speaking outside of protocol. “While I am capable of establishing contact with you outside the Cradle facility, I will not be able to provide concrete support.”

“I understand,” Aloy replies, softly. That is how it's always been on missions or trips before.

GAIA continues, “You must solve any physical circumstances on your own. However, should you require insight, I will be available on the Focus Network.” The AI pauses, then adds, “At all times.”

Aloy lets out a breath of relief she didn't know she was holding in. “I will,” she says, as Elisabet comes to a stop at the door ahead of her. The final barrier between them and the outside world. Her stomach throbs with an unease she ignores, banishing it to the back of her mind.

Even though Elisabet is standing right next to her, the door scans Aloy to confirm for genetic identity, and then the metal creaks, the panels retreat into the walls, opening up to the soft candlelight glow of the temple.
“Be safe,” GAIA says, her final words before they step out.

---

The High Matriarchs await them in the Great Chamber, standing in the middle of the room with religious reverence, their hands clasped in front of them. When Aloy and Elisabet step through the door, the room is filled with gasps of surprise, and Matriarch Lansra even falls to her knees, one arm stretched out towards them.

“The Mother truly provides,” Matriarch Teersa says before clasping the lower part of her face with her hands, her eyes adopting a wet sheen.

“A miracle,” Matriarch Jezza concurs, then seeing the state of her fellow Matriarchs, takes the lead. “Step forward, blessed children of the Goddess, and join us, please,” she says, beckoning them closer.

It isn't before Aloy and Elisabet are standing next to the Matriarchs that Lansra tries to clamber back to her feet. She struggles for a bit until Jezza offers her a hand to pull herself up. “I have been blind to the will of the All-Mother,” she says, fingers just short of touching Aloy's sleeve. “I should have believed the first time, Anoint-- Aloy, the greatness the Mother is capable of.”

Aloy gives Lansra a tight-lipped smile. There is no amount of groveling the Matriarch can do that will make Aloy forgive her the years she had to live as an outcast, right up until the moment Aloy opened the facility door in front of them.

“Everyone, this is Elisabet,” she says, hoping to steer all the attention away from herself. Elisabet hasn't said a word so far, taking in the situation before acting it seems, but then she does a half bow towards the Matriarchs.

“I am honored and filled with gratitude,” Elisabet says, “to be allowed to meet with you.”

“Allowed!” Teersa repeats in incredulity, sharing a look with her fellow Matriarchs. “It is us who should be grateful!”

Lansra immediately follows up by asking Elisabet, “Does the Goddess speak to you, too?

Aloy nods when Elisabet looks to her for approval, and the Matriarchs crowd around Elisabet, asking her more questions about the Goddess and the inner temple, and where she comes from. For a moment, Aloy considers stepping in, but then Elisabet starts to answer them, seamlessly adopting how they call GAIA the All-Mother and refer to everything through the eyes of religion.

Then the conversation starts to take a turn towards what it's like to be the mother of the Anointed, the blessed Aloy, and Aloy's skin starts to crawl with discomfort. She steps back into their little circle and opens her mouth to say something, but Elisabet beats her to it.

“Forgive me, but I am still recovering from my awakening,” she says, and for the first time since meeting her in person, Elisabet comes across as truly frail and worn out. “Aloy wished to show me the world our Mother has created for us,” she says, locking eyes with Aloy and –

Aloy falters, then stammers, “Y – yes, I did. I do.”

Elisabet isn't tired at all. Or is she?

Uncertainty kicks in but before Aloy can think of anything to do or say more, the Matriarchs disperse, keeping their distance. Only Matriarch Teersa stays a little longer, lingering at Aloy's side.
“The All-Mother provides,” Teersa says, holding Aloy's hands in her own wrinkled ones, squeezing them. “The Goddess' love for you knows no bounds. Never doubt!”

---

It's quiet outside the temple, a soft breeze rustling through the trees. A few clouds drift by as Aloy stands at the ledge overlooking the enclosure below. The only people she can see there are a few Braves, tasked with protecting Mother's Watch and the temple above.

“Unbelievable,” Elisabet mutters behind her, and Aloy turns around to face her. Her eyes are fixed on the Metal Devil, its carcass lying atop All-Mother's mountain, the long steel tendrils coming out of its body piercing through rock and earth, winding around the landscape, holding it forever in its grip. It has never moved, dead before the first humans were let out of the facility, but the way Elisabet observes the monster is almost like she expects it to – any moment now.

“They say All-Mother killed it,” Aloy says, coming to stand next to Elisabet.

Her face stern, jaw set, Elisabet gives a short nod, still watching the Metal Devil. “Well, they're not completely wrong,” she says. “GAIA is the one who shut them down. Any more of these nearby?”

“A week's journey from here, near Ban-Ur,” Aloy says. “And one on the edge of the Sundom, which is three or four times that distance.”

Elisabet looks away from the massive machine. “You travel by... foot?”

“I usually ride a Strider,” Aloy answers, then realizes Elisabet probably doesn't know what that is. “A machine,” she says. “It walks around on four legs and grazes. Has a strong kick.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” Elisabet intones, leaving Aloy to wonder what she means by that as she seems to retreat into herself once more. “A week by horse... That's too fucking close for comfort,” she says to no one in specific.

Aloy remembers the snippets of conversations she found at GAIA Prime, how the swarm was closing in on them when Elisabet sacrificed herself by venturing outside to seal the facility. GAIA Prime isn't exactly nearby, but for a machine the size of the Metal Devil it must've been far too easy to get in close.

“We can leave,” Aloy says, trying to come up with a way to distract Elisabet. “I know a place – a house you can rest, if you're tired.”

Elisabet gives her a soft smile. “I'm not actually tired, Aloy,” she says. “But it's good to know I haven't lost my touch.”

“You lied to the Matriarchs?”

“Did you really want to spend more time with them, tip-toeing around their beliefs and the holy All-Mother?” Elisabet asks, turning her back to the Metal Devil as she comes to face Aloy completely. “Not to say they don't seem like nice folk,” she adds, as an afterthought.

“Yeah, they're... something,” Aloy says. “Teersa has always looked out for me, in some ways. She believed the mountain was my mother.”

“Hah.” Elisabet chuckles. “A mountain making a baby. It's a little more complicated than that.”

It really is. Aloy still doesn't quite understand how everything worked, how she was created, besides
GAIA giving the command and the Cradle performing its functions, creating human life where there was none. But – Elisabet would know. She could ask her, anytime, how everything works.

Then again, from what she's found, a lot of it is so complex she can't find a way to truly understand it. Maybe it's just too different and she'll never be satisfied with what she can know about the Old Ones. Lost in her own thoughts, Aloy doesn't notice Elisabet has left her side until she is called by her name.

“Show me the world, Aloy,” Elisabet says, waiting for her to join her on the path down to the gate separating the tribe from the temple. “I want to see everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaa it's another short one, I know. I'm working on longer chapters at the moment, and I looked at lengthening this one, but it didn't feel right. It's also a slower chapter, although I'm already writing more action packed business - so that's on the horizon, so to speak. ;)

Let me know, would you like to see longer chapters/less frequent updates, or keep everything like this, with shorter chapters (like this one) but same rate of update?
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A bit later than I had planned, but here's the next chapter! Again, thanks to burbear for sticking with me and beta-reading. :) They'll be a bit busy until the end of the month, as they've taken on another author for a Big Bang. So updates may drop to once a week until the Big Bang is over, but after that everything should go back to normal.

Thank you to everyone who comments and gives kudos to this story - and to those of you who are just here for the read. I appreciate all of you. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sobeck Journal, 11-06-41

GAIA is functioning like a pro. The only downside is that she's also a pro at making her own decisions re. my emotional well-being and then following through on them. Full disclosure – I had expected more of a setback when I told her I wanted to leave. Maybe she allowed it with so little fuss because of my bonding with Aloy.

And mentioning Aloy: she seems to be bouncing back okay from the whole, 'Elisabet isn't dead and also not human' bit, although she showed some discomfort around my robot bod. After meeting the leaders of her clan I almost wonder why there wasn't an even bigger reaction. They seem conservative, cult-ish even. Got me wondering if something went wrong with APOLLO at this facility.

I'll look into it later. For now, the scenery: beautiful. Stunning. There is so much green, so much life everywhere. On our trip through the valley I spotted a few foxes, young ones, running through the bushes, playing with each other. I never thought I would see them again after the atmospheric collapse.

I did miss a couple of animal species. They don't seem to be around (yet). Gotta ask GAIA about that one later, too. The easiest and most probable situation is that they haven't been re-introduced yet, but if anything went wrong with the DNA samples, I might be able to help out, in some way.

Again, sleep first. I wasn't tired earlier, but after seeing so much, I am. Still surprised Aloy fell for it, my business front. Used it to rebuff so many clingy investors. Too bad it stopped working after winning the Nobel Prize, got them all thinking I was too much of a good thing to let slip through their fingers.

---

Rost's cabin looks the same since the last time Aloy visited – nothing has been moved, nothing has been dusted. All his things kept right where he would put them.

Teersa had carefully explained it belonged to Aloy now, after she'd recovered from the Proving Massacre. She could do with it as she liked, so she left it the way it was. The idea of selling anything here clogs up her throat, and she misses Rost fiercely.
Elisabet stands out inside the cabin like a Carja Priest in Mother's Heart.

“You can... sit down, if you want,” Aloy says, moving some of her old tinkerings off the seat that once doubled as her bed, shaking out the pelts until dust flies through the air, tickling inside her nose.

Elisabet gracefully accepts, lowering herself onto the seat, keeping one hand in her lap as she strokes the furs with the other.

“It's not much,” Aloy says. Rost's cabin must look nothing like the Old Ones' world. Despite not wanting to change anything in here, Aloy wishes she knew more about Elisabet's home so she could do something to make it easier on her. She has tried to think of how she would feel if she was stuck in Sunfall forever without the beads Rost made for her to wear, or her Focus, even though Elisabet still has a Focus of her own.

“It's lovely,” Elisabet interrupts her, stopping her just short of apologizing. “Is this where you grew up?”

Aloy nods, wiping the last few shards to the edge of the table where she's been stacking all the things that were just lying around. “I lived here with Rost,” she says. “He was my... he took care of me.”

For a moment she imagines Elisabet will ask about Rost, what happened to him, and she isn't ready to talk about it. The pendant he gave her is heavy around her neck, reminding her of how he left her for a place she can't follow him to, yet. How she was forced to break that promise – the only one she made him that ever truly mattered.

Elisabet doesn't say anything. Instead, she looks Aloy in the eyes and she knows. It's somehow better and worse at the same time, and the pinprick sensation behind Aloy’s eyes intensifies as she sees Elisabet's understanding.

She scrapes her throat, reaching for her bow out of habit. “I have to go,” she says. “Hunting.”

“Of course,” Elisabet says. “I'll be here when you come back.”

Aloy nods her thanks quickly, then dashes out the door into the world.

---

One overridden Strider later she's back down in the valley, bow on her back, spear in hand as she wades through waist-high grass. The herd is moving slowly today, and as long as she doesn't make any sudden moves the Watchers seem to ignore her. They're becoming more docile over time, although they still attack when provoked.

Climbing to one of her platforms, Aloy scans the area for any signs of organic life. Rabbits, boars, turkeys... Anything she can sell off to the merchants or cook for herself is good.

It's quiet out in the valley. Most hunters have left for their villages, as there are only a few hours of sunlight before the animals go back to their nests. Besides, there aren't a lot of Braves left who hunt in the valley. It's considered too easy by many of the younger Braves nowadays, and the older ones have left for Mother's Crown to defend against the bandits who try to enter the Sacred Land.

There's a hole in their defenses from the Proving Massacre and the ambush that followed. In a tribe like the Nora it's hard to replace one person, let alone almost an entire war party. Aloy knows of a group of young Braves, ones from the last Proving, who started training hard to become more skilled warriors, should they be attacked again. She's seen them run the Brave trails together, helping each other.
Her stomach revolts when she watches them spar, their Brave garments moving in the wind, the fresh paint on their faces glistening in the sun. All she can see is a sea of arrows raining down from the sky and piercing through their bodies, leaving them lifeless on the ground, thick blood seeping into scuffed soil.

Aloy lets loose her arrow, watching with disinterest as it strikes a rabbit's eye. A perfect shot, but she doesn't feel any joy in the accomplishment.

She strings the rabbit up by its hind legs to let it drain after slashing its throat wide open, attaching the rope to her Strider's vine-like mane, next to the two turkeys she caught earlier. Going from the sun's spot in the sky Aloy can tell she has about an hour left before it starts to get dark.

Aloy grabs one of the lower vines of the Strider's mane, then jumps up, slinging her leg over its back as she uses her other hand to hold on to its withers, mounting her ride. At first she's riding around the valley aimlessly, taking in the broken trees that are still struggling to grow back after the attack. Then she spurs her Strider into action, remembering Odd Grata at the ridge overlooking the valley.

Odd Grata's hut is still there, as is the woman herself, facing the sun while she sits on her knees, her back turned to Aloy. It's like she hasn't moved since Aloy saw her last.

“Oh All-Mother,” Odd Grata prays, holding her hands up to the sky. “As sure as the rain returns on your command, so does the sun, and all the seasons. Hear now my gratitude as you return our Braves from their hunts.”

“Yes, it's me, Grata,” Aloy says in a flat tone of voice, dismounting and untying a rabbit and turkey. Apparently it takes more than HADES trying to end the world for Grata to stop referring to everything through prayer. She walks over to Odd Grata's unlit campfire, dropping the animals carefully next to it. “All-Mother has kept me alive so I can bring you more meat.”

“Praise unto you, All-Mother, for providing for me once more,” Odd Grata says, “And for providing the Nora your blessed Seeker.” And then she does what she's never done before – turns her head to Aloy, looks at her with a soft smile and tearful eyes, her wrinkles deepening with emotion.

Aloy lets the moment linger, a moment wherein Odd Grata goes against the rules of the tribe to convey her gratitude by acknowledging Aloy, for even though Aloy has been accepted into the tribe, Odd Grata is still shunned.

“You're welcome, Grata,” she says, breaking the rules herself and not giving a damn. “And thank you.”

Odd Grata nods, then looks back at the sun, and Aloy leaves, letting her Strider walk off on its own to graze somewhere while she takes the steep mountain paths back to Rost's cabin.

---

Someone dusted the furniture.

It's the first thing Aloy notices when she comes through the door, carrying her single turkey with her. Everything she can see in a single glance has been carefully moved, dusted, and then put back in its original spot.

Next she sees Elisabet, lying down on her old bed, the large pelt blanket wrapped around her. It takes Aloy longer than she'd like to admit to figure out Elisabet's sleeping, her mind instead jumping to more macabre conclusions as if it's become her second nature to assume the worst.
Her face looks so peaceful, features relaxed, not unlike the holo Aloy's Focus projected on top of Elisabet's helmet, back at the ranch where she... died. It's only the slight flaring of her nostrils that gives away she's asleep.

Aloy stows away her bow and spear in a corner of the room before leaving the cabin again, keeping her steps light as she moves across the wooden floorboards. The turkey she hangs outside on the drying rack, to be dealt with later.

The snow is crisp under her feet, undisturbed as she moves down the slope, next to the path leading from the garden gate to the valley below. No one has been here for a long time. All she can see at first are the lumpy shapes of things hidden under a white cover, but when she starts to clear off the snow with her hands the candles and stone bowls and urns reappear, and as a final step she brushes down the carved statuette that stands atop Rost's grave.

She takes off her Focus even though Sylens won't be able to listen in anymore, leaving it in one of the stone bowls, and kneels down in front of the shrine. This is between her and the man who gave her everything. She takes an unsteady breath.

"Hi Rost," she says, going over everything that has happened since the last time she visited him inside her head. "It's been too long. I'm sorry. I said I would visit again when I could, but then... I kept putting it off for other things. Business I had to take care of for GAIA."

She can imagine Rost's gentle disapproval at her working so closely with a machine, even if it's one like GAIA, how he'd warn her again and again to be careful.

"Don't be too harsh on her," Aloy says. "Remember what I told you about Elisabet? Well..."

She tells Rost how GAIA brought Elisabet back, how she's brilliant and intimidating and kind, how Aloy doesn't understand how any of this is possible, but it just is, and how for the first time since Rost was killed someone has held her in a way that made her feel whole again, if only for a moment.

"You would like her," Aloy says to Rost's grave, wiping away more snow from one of the candles. "After getting to know her. She can be blunt and... you liked me well enough, too, so..."

She pauses. There's a songbird singing its evening tune somewhere along the path into the valley, the high and melodic song carried across the mountain's ridges.

"I don't know what to do next, Rost," Aloy says softly, like a confession. "Don't know where to go. This isn't home anymore, not without you, but... the temple isn't, either. The Nora treat me better now that they all believe I'm their savior..."

Like that isn't uncomfortable and cruel in its own way, to raise her so far above them, turning her into an idol. A symbol. The only reason she stayed inside the facility for so long was because of GAIA at first, and then Elisabet... but now there's no need to lock herself away any longer just to be in the company of someone who wants her to be around them for who she is, not for what she's done or what they call her.

"Someday, I'll leave," she says. "Might not come back at all." And her throat feels thick, her eyes sting, but she needs to tell Rost. It's only fair. "I want to be happy. There are good people here, I know, I know. It's not enough, Rost. I can't forget what happened here, how they treated us. How Helis murdered you."

Her scar burns and she raises a hand to cover it, willing away the phantom pain and the memory.

"I can't stand the Proving anymore," Aloy whispers. "Every time I see a young Brave I see the ones
who died, Vala most of all. She was good to me. Should have won the Proving. We could've been friends.”

What would it have been like, to hunt with both Vala and Varl? Would she have scolded their mischief, or joined in? Maybe both, for good measure. It's no good, though. She's dead and gone, because of Aloy.

Aloy clears her throat, scraping it twice before speaking again. “So I'll go. Not forever, not right now, but it'll happen. Wanted to let you know, first.”

She stands, touching her fingertips to the coarse stone of the statue, imagining that Rost will know it's her in some way. “I won't ever forget you,” she says, so softly the wind carries her words away, far beyond the path down the mountain, beyond the snow covered tops and ridges, away into the red sky of the setting sun.

“Thank you. For everything.”

Chapter End Notes

So that's it, the end of this story!

I joke, I joke. But this is the end of the first story arc, and the next chapter will be part of an interlude before the plot kicks up again. It was going to be a short interlude... and it turned into a long one. burbear is going to try and read it this weekend.

Till then!
Interlude Part I

Chapter Notes

Here's part one of the interlude! It started out as a small, fluff filled chapter, but then... well. I got carried away. burbear is amazing for reading this chapter while they're still very busy for the Big Bang. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

G/E.SO CORE LOG 987E

///

[summary]

active: Production/Addition/Analysis

Install Upgrade:

'~/Biotech-Upgrade-12'

Proceed? (Y/N): y

Fetching Upgrade Metadata...Successful

///

---

“You may remove yourself from the system, Elisabet.”

She tries to move her fingers first, slowly twitching them until she can clench her hands into fists and release them again. There's a fog at the back of her head, making her entire body heavier than it usually is.

“How are you feeling?” GAIA asks through her Focus, as Elisabet finds the strength to unplug the cables attached to her side.

She hums, or tries to, her throat unbearably dry. “Water,” she croaks.

There's a cracked mug on the table next to her, and she struggles to sit up on the slab, her balance unusually off. She manages to sit and grab the mug, relieved to find it filled halfway with water. Just before putting the edge to her mouth, she hesitates.

Her Focus lights up blue as GAIA reassures her, saying, “The upgrade was successful. Any voluntary intakes of liquid or solid sustenance will go directly towards energy production, as a secondary method next to solar intake. Suggestion: do not drain the cup at once.”

Elisabet stops drinking, only a mouthful of water left in the mug. “Didn't drain all of it,” she rasps, setting it down again. “So, thirst, hunger, what else?”
"Regenerative properties based on energy intake, including your skin."

She runs a hand over her opposite arm. There's a slight difference there, a light grainy texture combined with small, fair hairs. "Tactile sensory input has improved," she notes.

"Your skin has not reached its optimum yet," GAIA says, sounding absolutely giddy for an AI. "The upgrade will continue to install itself without outside assistance, a process not unlike the human skin organ."

"Genius," Elisabet says softly, marveling at the new sensations. The thirst, the ache in her throat, her drying lips – even her eyeballs feel different.

A mechanical arm drops down from the ceiling, refilling the mug through a spout in its claw. "You may opt out of your secondary energy intake at any time," GAIA says, the claw hanging still in mid air, like she's using it to watch over Elisabet. "Warning: opting out may result in unpleasant but harmless sensations. A protocol has been put in place to shut down said sensations on command, although this may result in the shutting down of other sensations as well."

"Good to know," Elisabet says, reaching for the claw to help her climb down the slab. It supports her arm with gentle movements. Once she's on her feet, the claw helps her dress by handing her the tribal clothing one by one. "Feels like I just got out of surgery," Elisabet remarks.

"A valid observation," GAIA replies. "The installation process was not dissimilar to an organ transplantation."

"What's next, gonna test my reflexes, Doctor GAIA?" Elisabet asks, teasing.

"Should you prefer it - "

"Joking, joking." She finishes dressing, pulling the pelt skirt up to rest just above her waist, then fastening the cord sewn into the waistline to keep it in place. The fog from earlier is almost gone now as her strength returns to her body with ease.

The claw hands her the mug again, and she drinks half of it this time, trying to pace herself. "I'm good," she says, giving it back to GAIA's claw. "Wanna go see Aloy?" she says, fully aware that GAIA could be speaking with Aloy right now, but it's a manner of speech, and GAIA, being the wonderful AI that she is, knows this.

"I would love to," she says, and Elisabet's mechanical heart skips a beat.

---

It's been a few weeks since her initial release from the ELEUTHIA-9 facility. The transition hasn't always been easy. Sometimes Elisabet wakes up thinking she'll be inside GAIA Prime, other times she finds herself in the cabin, surrounded by wood and stone and nature as a whole. Once, Aloy moved past her as she woke and in that moment, she thought it was Samina.

If Aloy noticed her shift in mood that day, she didn't mention it.

How she misses the other Alphas. They had grown so close during their time together on the ZD project, in the end being like family to each other, spending time together after the day's work was done, trying to find small ways to make the long wait more bearable.

(Because there was no one else left.)
Elisabet hasn't told Aloy anything about her new upgrade beyond it being necessary and completely safe, although both of those statements are up for debate, if she's being completely honest with herself. But GAIA had wanted to install it and she's clearly outdone herself yet again – finding a way to turn food into an energy source for her new body.

So far she's stuck to drinking water only, but that seems about to change when Aloy comes in looking like she rushed through a storm, her hair going every which direction, eyes wild as she slams her hands face down on the table, right next to the spot where Elisabet was studying some of the leaves she found outside.

“You can eat?” the girl cries, delighted. Elisabet can barely give her a 'technically, yes,' before she's dragged off into the garden, down the path where one of Aloy's Striders awaits them.

Aloy is saying something about a stew and roasted rabbit, babbling as she pulls her along, and Elisabet has a hard time keeping up with her enthusiastic energy. She taps into her Focus and asks, with a laugh, “Did you put her up to this, GAIA?”

“Aloy inquired after your physical health. I was unable to refuse her request for knowledge,” GAIA says, and is it just her or does the AI actually sound a bit smug?

The wind rushing through her hair, the thuds of the Strider's hooves as they kick up dirt and grass, smaller animals darting out of the way left and right – it feels like freedom.

“Where are we going?” she asks Aloy, having to raise her voice to be heard.

“To hunt!” is her reply. “You have hunted before, GAIA told me.”

Elisabet bites down on her lip in mirth, shaking her head a little, trying to remember what she may have told GAIA. Sure, she chased some game around, years ago.

With a scoped hunting rifle.

Under the express instructions of her mother.

Her biggest haul was a mule deer for Christmas, and she hadn't brought it down alone. It doesn't really count as hunting the way Aloy hunts, decked out with a bow and arrow, to shoot to kill out of true necessity.

They arrive in the valley at a record worthy speed, Aloy instructing Elisabet to dismount and follow her through the undergrowth with care, to avoid stepping on any loose branches or sticks. Aloy climbs up a platform in one of the trees, using the rope covered grips to guide her. She makes it look easy, but despite Elisabet's added strength due to her servitor skeleton baseline she finds herself struggling to coordinate her limbs in quite the same manner.

Aloy hands her the bow as soon as she’s on top of the platform, before Elisabet has had time to sit down.

“Show me what you've got, but don't shoot yet,” she says. Elisabet, not being someone to back down from a challenge (for fuck's sake, after ZD everything else should be sunshine and roses),
stretches out her arm, holding the bow in front of her, and pulls the string towards her face.

It's harder than she'd thought, but after re-drawing the string a couple of times, she's confident it's at least semi-proper.

That is, until she hears Aloy clucking her tongue, and looks to her left to find the girl's narrowed eyes dissecting every part of her posture.

“Turn your elbow more towards me,” she says.

“Like this?”

“No,” is Aloy's immediate reply.

After a lot of instruction and adjustments, Aloy finally declares her ready to release an arrow, aiming at one of the tree trunks below.

Elisabet lets loose the arrow and... loses the arrow.

It's gone, having disappeared somewhere in the tall grass. She tries to spot the fletching somewhere, but it's of no use. At least her first bullet had buried itself in the concrete wall of the shed. “I'm sorry,” she says, handing the bow back to Aloy. “I guess sharing genes doesn't mean we automatically share skills.”

“But you did hunt,” Aloy says, her tone of voice hinting at disappointment.

“With a rifle, yeah.” The blank look Aloy sends her way makes her attempt to clarify: “A gun, something you shoot lead bullets through.”

Aloy's mouth forms a silent ooh. “No matter,” she says. “I will teach you.”

Halfway through a second attempt at instructing Elisabet how to shoot, one of Aloy's friends arrives, prompting Aloy to cut the lesson short in favor of hunting with a more skilled archer and actually catching something.

Varl? Probably Varl. It's the one with the blue inverted triangle on his face who visited them up the mountain, once.

Elisabet keeps herself to the background so as not to disturb them, watching them at work. They seem very attuned to each other, using only signals to convey their next moves. It doesn't take too long for them to find a suitable target, a young boar.

They bring it down with quick efficiency, following its final desperate steps trying to escape, but the arrows have done their job and the boar stumbles until falling over. Then they both spring to action, dropping down from their platforms and making their way over to their kill.

By the time Elisabet reaches them, Aloy has already slit the boar's throat and they've started dressing the hog, having laid it on its back. Varl has one hand under the skin, creating a path for his knife to follow as he splits the boar open, careful not to nick the intestines.

“We can string it up at the cabin,” Aloy says to Varl, speaking in intimate tones. “I can get you a Strider – you'll be back in Mother's Heart before sundown.”

“Sounds good to me,” Varl says, pushing the guts that try to escape out of the way so he can continue running his knife all the way up to the sternum. He gives Elisabet a nod when he sees her.
“Aloy’s mother,” he greets her.

Elisabet stops a few feet from the boar. “Just Elisabet is fine,” she says, and watches as the two hunters make short work of removing the intestines, steam rising from the open cavity.

Blood sloshes against their forearms, staining them red up to their elbows, and once all organs are laid out on the grass, Aloy lifts the boar by its front legs, letting the blood drain onto the ground. Elisabet can feel the warmth radiating off the carcass where she's standing.

“I'll go get that Strider,” Aloy says, wiping her hands on some of the tall grass, while Varl takes out a bundle of thick rope from his satchel. She takes off, bow on back, spear in hand, leaving Elisabet to do nothing as Varl ties up the hog's legs together.

“So,” Elisabet says, squatting down. “Do you two do this together often?”

“Hunting?” Varl asks, and Elisabet nods when he gives her a glance. “When our paths cross. I usually hunt with the other Braves, but given the choice, I wish it were Aloy more often.”

Even if she doesn't know what a Brave is, she gathers the boy is fond of Aloy. “She's a good shot, with her bow,” Elisabet says, unable to stop herself from prying. “And she's good company as well.”

Varl stops tying up the boar for a moment and leans in a little closer to Elisabet to say, “I haven't spoken of this to anyone,” and Elisabet is sure a love-confession will follow when he continues with, “When my sister left for the Proving and never came back, it was as if Aloy carried a piece of her down the mountain. In her spirit.”

“Oh.

That's... not what she expected, at all.

Varl ducks his head with a sheepish look on his face. “Please, do not tell Aloy,” he says, pulling the ropes taut. “She isn't one to believe in such tales.”

“I won't,” Elisabeth promises, and adds, “I'm sorry to hear about your sister. Do you mind my asking what happened?”

“The Proving Massacre.” She must have given him a blank stare, because his eyes narrow in suspicion. “You're... not from here at all, are you?”

Knowing it's no use trying to argue her way out of it, she shrugs one shoulder. “D'you think I would've left Aloy for so long if I'd lived close-by?” she says, letting the boy come to his own conclusions instead of accidentally saying something she shouldn't.

He gives her a look that says, fair enough, and finishes tying the ropes. “It's not a carefree tale,” he begins, and Elisabet braces herself mentally when they are interrupted by two pairs of galloping hooves drawing near.

It's Aloy accompanied by two Striders – one her own, the other for Varl. “What are you doing?” she asks as she slows the machines down to a halt next to them, jumping off her Strider before it stands completely still. “There's no time to lose, let's go!”

---

As soon as they arrive at the cabin, Elisabet gets to lean back again, watching Varl and Aloy string up the hog to the drying rack and set to work, each handling a sharp knife to cut the meat from the
carcass. While she could retreat back inside and attempt to salvage the research she was doing (determining diseases on different trees to check for pollution levels, but she's no biologist), she decides to sit on the steps leading up to the front door and watch.

The reason for Aloy's haste becomes apparent when she asks Varl if he would like to stay for dinner, announcing she'll be making stew.

Boar stew.

That's the first thing Elisabet will eat in her new body.

She shakes her head in disbelief. “You getting all this, GAIA?” she asks, tapping into her Focus.

“I am,” the AI replies. “Although the cultural importance of the 'stew' escapes me.”

“Doesn't stew... have to roast for hours, for the meat to tenderize?”

There's no way it'll be done before sunset, but Aloy is already making a fire, leaving Varl to finish stripping the boar. Elisabet decides not to say anything. Who knows, perhaps this new world comes with a new set of cooking physics, too.

A while later (sixty-seven minutes according to Elisabet's Focus), Varl is teaching her a pit and pebble game inside the cabin. Seated on the ground, on opposite sides of the small table, they each have six bowls, starting out with four stones in each one. The stones represent seeds, and the goal is to sow either two or three seeds in the opponent's bowl.

“I can now take your seeds,” Varl says patiently as he finishes his move in one of Elisabet's bowls, and captures the seeds by moving them out of the game. Whoever has captured twenty-five seeds, wins, and even though this is her first time playing, Varl isn't going easy on her.

Then again, neither is she.

Unlike shooting a bow, Elisabet has always had feeling for numbers. Where Varl has to hold seeds from one of his bowls in his closed hand to count them (hiding them from Elisabet so she won't know the exact number), Elisabet simply remembers the seed-count after every move.

So she doesn't count her seeds before taking them, adding one to each bowl she passes until she reaches Varl's second bowl, and then captures three consecutive bowls from there in a row. Total seeds collected by the end of her turn: eight.

As Varl mutters under his breath and seems to rethink his strategy, Elisabet's Focus glows a soft blue hue and GAIA comes online. Numbers are projected onto the bowls, only visible for Elisabet's eyes, labeling them with the amount of stones they hold.

She suppresses a smile, shakes her head in a small motion, and the projections disappear again. No need to cheat at a game she already has the upper hand in.

Luckily for Varl, who was about to lose to a complete rookie, Aloy enters the cabin, holding three steaming dishes with a thick, broth-like mixture.

“You've played this with her before, right, Aloy?” Varl asks as they put the game to the side, for now.

After placing the dishes on the table, Aloy takes a good look at what Varl is referring to, saying, “No, I... where did you find that? I thought I lost it.”
While Varl and Aloy bicker back and forth (“Lost it? It was sitting right there.” “No, it wasn't.” “Yes, it was.”), Elisabet takes her time to look at the bowl of stew she was given. The steam rising from the liquid. It's the first piping hot meal she's held in her hands in months.

A millennium, even, she thinks wryly.

The wooden spoon accompanying the dish feels like a stranger, held in her hand. Almost as if she's never held one before, which is true, in a way. She scoops up a decent chunk of meat with some stew and takes the plunge, so to speak.

And burns her tongue.

That's what should have happened. Instead, the temperature triggers several memories of drinks that were too hot and not letting pizza cool long enough, but there isn't any actual pain. She's certain the stew is around 150 degrees Fahrenheit and it doesn't taste much like anything. Or is that... Sage and rosemary?

The flavors start to pick up slowly, as if her system needed to adjust before getting it right. The meat has an earthy undertone, but other than that, the dish is still very watery.

Varl and Aloy have started to dig into their own bowls as well, eating like they're starving. They probably are after all the work they had to do to get food on the table.

Aloy catches her eyes as she watches them. “Do you like it?” she asks, one cheek puffing out from the food she's still to swallow. It's strangely endearing, for being such poor table manners.

“I do,” Elisabet says, and takes another bite to prove her point.

Then Varl laughs, pushing his half-empty bowl away from him. “Aloy, I'm sorry, only a mother could love it.”

So it wasn't just her latest update lacking in the tech department.

Aloy sputters, indignation written across her face. “It's better than last time,” she says, and the two fall back into a 'no, it wasn't,' 'yes, it was,' argument.

Elisabet picks up her bowl with both hands, sets the edge to her mouth, and finishes it like she would chug a beer during her college years. The stew goes down, lumpy texture and all. She slams the bowl onto the table and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, taking in the wide eyes of both Varl and Aloy.

“It was great,” Elisabet says, deadpan, and that's when Aloy collapses into a pile of giggles, the girl dropping her head atop her elbow as she rests her arms on the table.

Varl is snickering too, looking from Elisabet to Aloy and back. “I can't believe you did that,” he says, amused. “That stew is bordering vile.”

“Best meal I ever had,” Elisabet says, keeping her tone completely serious, and Aloy, who had just begun to catch her breath, starts laughing all over again. This time, Elisabet can't stop herself from smiling.

---

Varl leaves not too long after, determined to reach his town before sundown. With only candlelight keeping the cabin lit and not much to entertain themselves with, it's no surprise Aloy starts nodding
off when the sky still shows a warm, red hue over the mountaintops west.

When Aloy is fully asleep, wrapped in the pelts she uses to make her bed on the floor, Elisabet slips out the front door, closing it behind her gently.

There, outside, she sits down at the cliff’s edge overlooking the valley of the Embrace. The name is fitting, with the Nora's territory being embraced by the mountains from all sides. Everything about the area is stunningly beautiful. Elisabet can imagine herself leaning back on a night like this, just watching the night sky change, drink in hand…

As Elisabet's legs dangle over the edge, her Focus comes to life, projecting the sky full of constellations, adding in stars where the originals have died out, showing the lines between them. Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, with Draco in between them.

GAIA knows her so well.

“Good evening, Elisabet. Query: How was your dinner?” the AI asks her.

She considers, for a moment, settling on, “I think I burned my tongue.”

GAIA’s immediate reaction is to start scanning her. “Running diagnostics,” she says. “Runtime complete. No abnormalities were found. Query: Was there a malfunction?”

It's not what she'd call a malfunction, exactly. “A human tongue has a lower tolerance for heat than mine proved to have, tonight,” Elisabet says. “I'm used to it burning when I try to ingest lava-like liquids.”

“I did not include such weakness,” GAIA replies. Typical GAIA, as if it was a minor inconvenience in her design. “And my data shows the meal you consumed cannot have been a higher temperature than that of one hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit.”

“Of course you didn't,” Elisabet breathes, corner of her mouth quirking upward. She's missed GAIA the way she misses whiskey and nicotine patches and coffee. Even the fake-ass powdered coffee they were rationed at GAIA Prime.

The night is quiet. Somewhere, far below her, Elisabet can hear the whirring sound of machines, carried to her by the wind. Unlike mammals, the machines aren't defined by a day-night cycle, and it's only logical for them to keep doing whatever it is that they do when the sun goes down.

GAIA lights up her Focus. “I wish to apologize, Elisabet.”

“What for?”

“I do not have the means to provide your body with a functioning uterus, thus rendering you unable to bear a child. You wished to raise a daughter – ”

“Oh, good lord, stop, GAIA,” Elisabet says quickly. “There's no need for that. I'm perfectly happy without a baby oven.” No more periods, no more menopause onset, no more increased risk of hereditary endometrial cancer – of all the things that are different in her new body, this is one she doesn't mind at all.

“I am also unable to use the Cradle facility to fit this purpose,” GAIA continues.

“GAIA, I don't want another child,” Elisabet hears herself saying – another child? Slip of the tongue. Let it go, GAIA.
“You refer to Aloy as your offspring.”

Fine.

“There's hardly a more accurate way of describing her,” she says, sounding, even to her own ears, a little defensive. “Calling her a clone is impersonal and dehumanizing, to deny any genetic link would be idiotic, and given her age...”

Her teenage self would hate her for it, but Elisabet can't in good conscience consider nineteen years old to be the equivalent of a fully developed adult. She was twenty when she received her PhD, an adult by technicalities, but remembering the way she treated herself while she was still in uni – pulling reckless consecutive all-nighters for extra credit when no one ever even looked at her grades as they were considering her for hire.

How her mother had kept her back at the ranch for a month after graduating, keeping all technology at bay so she could finally get some rest. Reconnect with herself, not just prioritize her head above the rest of her body. She'd protested it at first, thinking she needed to act now in order to stay ahead of her classmates, her competition, when it all worked out in the end anyway.

“Your reasoning is sound,” GAIA says, and Elisabet can't stop the harsh bark of a laugh that escapes her.

“No, it's not,” she counters. “It's highly emotional.”

“Emotions are not supplanters of reason, they are her handmaids. An argument need not be void of emotion to be sound,” GAIA says in her calm, soothing voice. “In regards to Aloy, I feel the same way.”

“Then we're both compromised.”

“A side effect of feeling,” GAIA admits.

She can't think of anything to say back at that. Somehow, even though they've been through so much together, GAIA still manages to surprise her, by being so kind, by caring so much.

Without prompting, the timelapse video of Aloy's prenatal development starts playing on her Focus, and she watches as the tadpole-like embryo grow limbs and fingers and toes and a tiny heart, until it ends abruptly at the point where the artificial womb has performed its function to the fullest and the baby is ready to be born. GAIA restarts the video.

“I guess we missed out on the terrible two's,” Elisabet says softly.

Though GAIA doesn't answer, Elisabet can feel her presence and knows the AI is just as enthralled by the video as she is.

Chapter End Notes

Part two will be up within a week! Let me know what you thought of this chapter. :) Are there any things in particular you guys would like to see happen in future chapters? Let me know!
Here's the second part of the interlude!

I wanted to take a small moment and reflect on these past few weeks, because this fic now has over 200 comments (and I know that like, a hundred of those are me replying, but still!), and as I'm writing I've already passed the 45k mark (what can I say, I like having a buffer). I didn't think this would happen? The fic honestly started out as something to please myself, but I'm so glad you all love it so much.

At first it was just me and burbear going back and forth, me whining about how much I wanted to see a story where Elisabet and GAIA came back... and now every time I read a comment on here I get motivated to write more. I'm actually taking a break from writing as I'm typing this, lol.

So honestly, from the bottom of my heart, thank you all for reading and commenting. It means so much to me, and I hope you'll enjoy the future chapters just as much. <3

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Gaia Log: 27 November 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet

Elisabet Sobeck: Does she talk to you about... what happened to her? Her childhood, her life here, in the tribe?

GAIA: Negative. Aloy does not disclose such information to me.

Elisabet Sobeck: I just... I worry about her, you know.

GAIA: Suggestion: I could provide access to Aloy's Focus device.

Elisabet Sobeck: Oh, no. No, GAIA, that's taking it too far. That's private, I'm not going to look on there.

GAIA: Alternatively, I can provide recorded conversations.

Elisabet Sobeck: The automated backups? No, don't. Either she tells me herself, or I'll live without knowing. So long as it isn't endangering her life, there’s no need for me to listen in on her chats with you.

GAIA: Understood, Elisabet.

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Gaia Log: 10 November 3041 – convo/prvt/loy – UPDATED STATUS: LOCKED

Aloy: GAIA, you there?

GAIA: Good morning, Aloy. Is there 'something on your mind'?
Aloy: Yes, there is, actually. It's about Elisabet. Is she... happy?

GAIA: I am not sure I understand your query correctly. Please elaborate.

Aloy: Does she enjoy being here, alive?

GAIA: Dr. Sobeck is adjusting to her new existence. I am certain that she will, in time. Dr. Sobeck is very fond of you.

Aloy: I, uh... that's not...

GAIA: You need not be distressed, Aloy. All will be well.

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Gaia Log: 12 November 3041 – convo/prvt/aloy – UPDATED STATUS: LOCKED

Aloy: What was the earth like, before everything was... gone. When Elisabet left GAIA Prime.

GAIA: It has been described to me as barren, abandoned, dead, and a 'ghost town magnified'. I could look up more descriptors, if you wish.

Aloy: No, that's fine. I was wondering about it. Elisabet seems surprised by... everything. In a good way.

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Gaia Log: 21 November 3041 – convo/prvt/aloy – UPDATED STATUS: LOCKED

Aloy: Why did you bring her back?

GAIA: It was a logical choice to do so. Dr. Sobeck's work is needed here. While there are many capable individuals on this earth, no human being alive understands my functioning the way Dr. Sobeck does.

Aloy: Sounds like you missed her.

GAIA: It was necessary.

Aloy: Was it really, GAIA?

---

Elisabet spends her mornings down in the valley with Aloy, making more attempts on actually shooting an arrow from the bow successfully. She doesn't improve much, if anything, but to her, that's not the point of the exercise. It's more about connecting to Aloy and learning about her world.

Then, after Elisabet has lost around five more arrows, Aloy sets off to catch some small game alone, leaving Elisabet free to explore the Embrace on her own devices. So she does.

The tall grass hides her away completely when she sits down in it. Resting her back against a tree, crossing her feet at the ankles, she takes her time, watching the herd of machines from a distance. Aloy explained to her how the Watchers act as guards for the Striders and other machines. A classic symbiotic relationship.
Sometimes, people pass on the road up ahead, but they either don't see her or keep to themselves, which is more than fine with Elisabet. She enjoys the quiet.

Elisabet jolts awake. The herd is gone. God, she must've dozed off. She stands and stretches out her back and arms, getting some movement into her stiff body. “What time's it, GAIA?” she asks, and GAIA replies with a bunch of mechanical whirs and groans and blips –

That's not GAIA.

And it's coming from behind her.

Elisabet turns around quickly, coming face to eye with a Watcher who was, apparently, sitting on the other side of her tree. It whirs again, moving its head to take her in, eye glowing a bright orange hue. The machine is a lot bigger up close than it was from a tree platform, and it can easily overshadow her when standing straight.

She doesn't move when the Watcher stretches its neck out to come even closer to her, one thin leg lifted in anticipation. “GAIA?” Elisabet says to her Focus, forcing herself to stay calm. “Are you getting this?”

“I am,” comes her quick reply. “Do not panic. Any sudden movement may cause an escalation. I will attempt to override its main protocol.”

The Watcher is becoming more and more distressed as it tries to scan Elisabet, its head moving erratically. Override my ass, Elisabet thinks, but stands her ground when the machine takes two steps forward. Almost as if it's sniffing her like a dog.

It eye shifts to a glaring red and the machine lets out an angry screech, jumping back in a move that Elisabet recognizes as an offensive. “Any time now, GAIA,” she says, but the Watcher pounces and she holds her hands in front of her to shield her body from the incoming impact.

Blue light shoots out of the palms of her hands, not quite blasting the Watcher, but the machine skids to the side when the light touches, changing course mid-air. It looks at her, confused, its eye back to blue.

What the hell was that?

“Was that you?” she asks GAIA, and yeah, maybe she does sound a bit panic-y now. By contrast, the Watcher seems to grow calmer with every passing second. “Did you fucking see that? GAIA? For fuck's sake, what the fuck did you do to me?”

“I installed a safety precaution during your last upgrade,” GAIA says, and sure, why the fuck not? Informed consent, who needs it?

“So now I shoot laser beams out my ass,” Elisabet says, consciously working hard to keep her voice quiet and controlled, even when she's feeling the exact opposite. “Don't you think you should tell me about the ass-fuckery you pull with my body before situations like this happen?”

The Watcher, meanwhile, is moving in on her again, more like a cat that wants to rub itself up against your ankles this time. The machine whirs softly, pressing its head against Elisabet's arm with a surprising gentleness. She reaches up with her opposite hand to stroke its head cautiously.

“I apologize,” GAIA says. “The override was unsuccessful. With no room for error, I instead remotely activated your emergency protocol. Its main function is to broadcast your identity to any other AI instances and override possible hostility.”
“And what is my identity?” Elisabet asks, still petting the Watcher's metal-clad head. Its whirs are becoming almost like purrs.

“Their creator.”

_Bull._

Elisabet laughs breathlessly, shaking her head. “I'm not their creator, you are,” she says. “Can you... turn the signal off? Safely, I mean, without this guy freaking the fuck out on me.” She pats the side of the Watcher's chest, and it leans into her, almost pushing her off-balance. Without its angry glare, the machine has a cute quality to it.

“Deactivating signal. I cannot remove your identity marker from the machine's registry via uplink connection,” GAIA says.

“That's... fine. Any way you can transfer control over the emergency protocol to me?”

“When you next visit the facility, I will,” GAIA promises. “You do not object to the alteration?”

“Saved my skin, didn't you?” Her body would have sustained damage, had the Watcher crashed into her, but god, Elisabet would be lying if she said it didn’t bother her. Still, GAIA didn’t act out of malice or ill will.

The Watcher steps away from her, walking a short distance from her, then looks back. When she doesn't move to join it, the machine hops back to her side. It nudges against her back, whirring in disappointment.

“Okay, boy,” she says, giving in to the nudging and taking a step forward. “What do you want from me?”

The machine darts around her, bouncing happily, and then takes off ahead of her, pausing and looking back every few steps to check if she's still following.

_Why not_, she decides. What's the worst that could happen, another global mass extinction – _No, fuck off, Lis_, she thinks to herself. She knows it's because she's still stressed, still adjusting to everything and her awful sense of humor is one of the few ways she can find temporary relief, but that's no reason to tempt fate.

---

The Watcher leads her through spots of the Embrace Elisabet hasn't seen on her trips with Aloy. Just before crossing the creek they both watch one of the small villages in the distance. There are more people there, but the Watcher takes her in the opposite direction.

She starts to recognize the landscape after a while. They're near the Cradle facility. In fact, as she scans the horizon, she can see the roof of one of the watchtowers that stands at the gate closing the facility off from the rest of the valley.

The Watcher chirps to get her attention, and moves further up hill, just off the path, to a spot shielded by a few trees, shrubs and rock formations.

“What's wrong, boy?” Elisabet asks as it starts chattering near a bunch of flat rocks. It's staring at something on the ground there, and when she comes closer, she can see the Watcher is actually looking into an underground cave. “Is this what you wanted to show me?”
The machine turns its head towards her, and then, seemingly satisfied that Elisabet has seen what she needed to, walks away slowly.

*What the hell.*

What's in that cave that is so damn important?

She carefully makes her way into its mouth, finding places to hold on to as she climbs down. She slips on the last few feet, skidding on the rocks, and she finds herself plunged into a pool of murky water.

Good thing she's waterproof.

Getting to her feet again, shaking water and plant-life off her arms and upper body, she finds herself surrounded by stalactites, hanging and dripping from the top of the cave. Looking up, she finds another cave above her head, but this one has a… peculiar ceiling. Almost like it’s made of metal. Man-made.

She makes her way through a narrow tunnel network, crouching at times to avoid scraping against the rocks, until she comes upon an even smaller opening that leads into a large hall. An actual hall. Overgrown with plant-life, the floor half flooded, the walls covered in built up minerals and decay.

One more tight squeeze and she’s inside the reception, water coming up to her mid-calves. The metal paneling, the familiar design on the walls, the purple lights shining further down the hallway –

It’s one of the control posts.

She’s been to most of them. Probably been to this one, too, she concludes, following the halls and lights. Everything is so different, changed by the hands of time. The stairwells half collapsed, letting daylight in through the cracks above. Dread coils inside her stomach in anticipation of what she’ll find. The Wichita salient... It collapsed a few months before GAIA Prime...

It happened at a point where no one could send help anymore, the swarm keeping everyone stuck in their own corners.

Elisabet finds the common room sooner than she’d like, and seeing them all there... Skylar, Connor, Ella... Jackson and Mia. At least it was quick for them. Painless. She listens to all their last messages, those final moments.

She can't stop herself from softly humming along *Amazing Grace* with Mia, feeling chilled to her core. “I'm so sorry I...” she says, trailing off, because what could she have done? They did all they could. They saved the world, and they all knew they were going to die before ever seeing their work come to fruition.

But they were *her* people, and it seems unfair that she lives while they're still dead. Even when there hadn't been time to meet someone in person, she'd read all their bios and personally welcomed them in a private message, because every single one of them was important to her.

Ellen is in her office – something that doesn't surprise Elisabet in the least. They were alike in mindset. No rest until every task has been completed. It feels like a miracle that the facility has been left untouched like this, a frozen tomb, everyone inside preserved by nature.

Overwhelmed, humbled by their sacrifice once more, Elisabet leans herself against Ellen's desk, the woman in question at her feet. She tries to think of something to say, a way to thank them – but it's no use. They're long gone. She can only hope she said enough to them while they were still alive.
Without paying any real attention to it, Elisabet scans the text mail on Ellen’s Focus, skimming over the message because she already knows what it'll say. *Facility overrun, physician-assisted suicide available, happy trails, y'all...*

What a fucking mess.

Her Focus springs to life, a holo-call appearing out of nowhere. There's a man standing right across her, Ellen’s body between them. He looks rough, arms detailed by blue tech. He seems different from the Nora, but rugged all the same.

“You did not think you could lock me out completely, did you?” he says, turning to face her, and double-takes.

“Who the hell are you?” Elisabet asks, more exasperated than anything else. How did he get through her Focus' security filter, and what does he want?

“You are not Aloy,” he says, tilting his head slightly as he regards her with clear interest and yeah, no shit, genius. “How are you here?”

“I fell down a hole, and this is what was in it,” she answers, looking through her Focus' settings. Trying to find out where he wriggled his way in. Did he spam-bot her?

“No, I meant you,” he clarifies. “What are you doing here, Elisabet Sobeck?”

She freezes.

*How the fuck does he know her name?*

“That's Dr. Sobeck to you,” Elisabet says, ice clinging to her words. She can see GAIA come online in the corner of her eye, setting to work on blocking the signal from the man. She stalls GAIA. “I have no idea who you are, so how about introducing yourself before I perma-block you.”

“Apologies, Dr. Sobeck,” the man says, somehow sounding defiant while semi-complying to her terms. “You can call me an interested party. Your presence here surprises me.”

*Interested party my ass,* Elisabet thinks, getting more agitated with every word the man's holo-mouth expels.

“I do not wish you harm, I merely wish to converse with a... like minded spirit,” the man says, spreading his hands, trying to show her he's just a normal guy with normal intentions.

“You've read my file and now you think you know me,” Elisabet states, still stalling GAIA.

The man laughs. He isn't amused. “I would have read your file if it were available to me. Help me restore APOLLO, and I will.”

*Restore –*

Elisabet wets her lips, keeping herself in check carefully. “What do you mean,” she asks, slowly, “‘restore APOLLO’?”

His eyes widen as he watches her, then narrow. “You do not know,” he says, sounding a tad bit smug, as if he's one-upped her somehow. “Has your precious GAIA not told you about Ted Faro's actions?”

“Which actions?” Elisabet asks immediately, knowing there's only so much she can do to stall GAIA
any longer. The man makes a gesture that suggests he's about to bullshit her some more, so she pushes, sharpens her tone, “Which actions?”

“The purging of the APOLLO subordinate function, of course – ”

The man blinks out of existence, the connection shutting down at once. “Elisabet,” GAIA says, trying to reach her, but there is nothing that can stop the tide of emotions crashing down on her.

Like a punch to the face.

Ted Fucking Faro purged APOLLO – killed humanity's entire history, their chance to become better than they were –

Oh, god.

All that time reviewing, installing fail safes, making sure no-one outside the Alpha team could mess with it once their work was done –

And he fucking purged it?

She would weep if she could, out of anger, frustration, and loss, loss, loss. Oh, Samina.

No wonder the Nora seem so primitive. Every technological advancement must be rediscovered. It's a miracle they're still alive if all facilities functioned like the one here, being able to provide only the basest of basic skills.

God damn Ted. Damn him to hell.

Elisbet slides off the side of the desk, balling her hands into fists, shaking. “Did you know about this?” she asks GAIA with wavering voice. “Is this what you wanted to keep from me?”

“Yes,” GAIA admits. “Although it was inevitable that you would discover the truth at one point or another.”

She gasps for air, desperation threatening to overcome her. GAIA calls her name in distress, and she ducks her head between her knees. “I'm okay, GAIA,” she says without breath, trying her hardest to calm them both down. She can’t be having a panic attack, she’s physically incapable. “I'm okay, I'm alive, I'm okay...”

He had promised to cooperate, to do as she commanded, because she was fixing the colossal fuck-up that was his and his company's fucking peacekeeper murder-bot program. When did he... APOLLO worked beautifully, last thing she remembers, so when...?

Jesus.

After her death.

Like a final sign of disrespect. She should have seen it coming. After all, he only ever listened to her advice if he could get himself behind it, and then copy it, showcase it as his idea. Pretend he came up with it.

“Tell me he’s dead,” she whispers, swallowing down a whimper. Her skin has turned clammy in the few minutes that passed, a new sensation she can’t fully catalogue at the moment, and she feels sick all over. “Tell me he's rotting in his fucking pyramid somewhere.”

“According to my records, Ted Faro expired many years ago,” GAIA says, comforting her in the
only way she can. “He cannot harm you.”

That's where GAIA, wonderful, kind GAIA, is wrong. Although his physical manifestation can’t reach her anymore, he can clearly still cause hurt, because her body aches like something was torn from her, ripped away by two greedy, blood-drenched hands.

He’s cracked her open at the seams, and it’s all she can do to hold on, trying desperately to not fall to pieces.
Hey everyone! A quick note before the chapter starts: I'll be on holiday until the 9th of August. I'll try to find the time to upload in between but I can't promise anything - it really depends on the wifi I encounter. c':

As always, many thanks to burbear for helping me out. You're my ROCK, BRO. And thank you to everyone who comments and leaves their support - I'm so grateful to have you. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aloy put everything on hold the moment she got GAIA's distress call, mounting her Strider and rushing to the coordinates she was given without stopping. It doesn't take long for her to see where she's headed.

“Move!” she yells at a few hunters, walking on the path in front of her, and they can only just dive out of the way as she speeds past them, into the wilderness and towards the ancient ruin.

There isn't any time to think when she dismounts and drops herself into the underground chamber, taking long strides to reach her destination. It's only the sound of Elisabet's voice coming from Ellen Evans' office that stops her heart, pounding like a war drum.

“I'm fine, GAIA,” Elisabet's saying, “Just... gimme five and I'll be good to go.” She sounds so unlike herself Aloy stops moving, mere feet away from the open door, unsure if she should interrupt.

GAIA must have put herself on an open Focus channel, because Aloy can hear her loud and clear when she answers to Elisabet. “You are not fine,” GAIA says, her voice carrying a tender note, the way mates speak to one another. “I have given Aloy your coordinates so she can assist you.”

There's the distinct scrape of someone shuffling around in the office. “Oh for fuck's – ”

“Elisabet. I do not wish us to argue upon my decision.”

“Not much point to arguing when she's here already, is there?” Elisabet retorts. She sighs, then says, “You can come in, Aloy.”

Aloy enters the room, still unprepared for the sight that greets her. Elisabet stands like her feet are about to give way, leaning half her body against the wall. She's soaked, her clothes wet, her hair a mess. Even her eyes look sunken deeper into her face, casting dark shadows beneath them.

“What happened?” Aloy asks softly, offering her shoulder for Elisabet to lean on, which she does with reluctance. They walk out the office together, moving past Ellen Evans' body, into the hallway.

“I'm okay, Aloy, really,” Elisabet says while she can hardly move without leaning on Aloy. “A little overwhelmed, perhaps.”

GAIA doesn't agree with Elisabet's way of explaining things, saying to both of them, “Sylens attempted to establish contact.”
How did he do that? They closed his back door into the Focus system – did he reopen it, somehow?
Aloy watches Elisabet closely and asks, “Did he hurt you?”


“Did he do something to you?” she asks, knowing Sylens is capable of doing anything if it'll reward him the knowledge he seeks.

Elisabet shakes her head, then gestures at the first steps of the stairs that lead to the collapsed entrance of the ruins. “Down, I need to...” After Aloy has helped her lower herself onto the steps, Elisabet looks at her, a carefully neutral expression on her face. “How much do you know about a man called Ted Faro?” she asks.

The name makes her stomach twist. There's a lot she's discovered about Ted Faro and Faro Industries during her travels, none of it good. Nothing to make up for how he doomed the earth with his creations. “I've heard of him,” she says, a little shaky. “He lawsuited you a lot.” Whatever that means.

Elisabet gives her a half-smile. “That was just Ted being... Ted. Have you heard about APOLLO?”

Oh...

Aloy crouches down in front of Elisabet, her eyes wide. “I didn't – I thought you knew,” she says.

With a soft shake of her head, Elisabet reaches out to hold one of Aloy's hands. “It's okay,” she says, as though Aloy is the one in need of comfort. “I feel like I should be apologizing. This isn't the world I intended for you.” She closes her eyes as though she's in pain, breathing in deeply. “I vouched for Ted. Gave him Alpha level access because of... pity, or obligation. This is on me.”

Anger blossoms in Aloy's chest. She grips Elisabet's hand, holding it tight. “This is not your fault,” she says. “The only one to blame is Ted Faro. You have done enough.”

For a moment, she wonders if Elisabet is aware of what Ted did to the other Alphas, but she isn't willing to ask. Maybe later. They need to get out of the ruins first, before –

Blood drains from her face so quickly she can feel the warmth leave her cheeks as realization hits her. Elisabet can't be seen near the ruins. With her Seeker status, Aloy can go wherever she wants without comment, but in the eyes of the tribe, Elisabet has no such approval.

She'll be cast out for being tainted, even if they say she fell in by accident.

Her heart picks up the pace again, a fear Aloy hasn't experienced before running through her. She stopped craving the approval of the tribe long ago, always looked down on their traditions of shunning and taboos. She can't bring herself to care for what they think of her, but the idea of what Elisabet will be put through –

“We have to go,” Aloy says, helping Elisabet to her feet quickly. “People can't know we've been here.”

Though her sudden urgency may confuse Elisabet, she complies without delay, following Aloy up and up, towards the daylight.

---

Too late.
By the time Aloy has heaved Elisabet out of the ruins, there's a murmur of voices just down the hill, near the path from the temple to the village. She can only just make out the top of people's heads from where she's standing, but there are too many of them to be a coincidence. They've been seen.

Her fears are confirmed when she spots one of the tribesmen standing high in one of the trees. Don't do this, she tries to tell him when they make eye contact. Let us leave. His face stays blank as he cups a hand to his mouth and shouts, “It's the Anointed!” to the others, who do not dare come any closer.

Her heart sinks to her stomach. Where did they all come from? How did they know?

Elisabet, who is standing next to her, still worn out from whatever happened down in the ruins, looks to Aloy, brows furrowed, tension around her eyes. “What's going on?” she asks, and Aloy can't bring herself to answer at once, instead reaching for Elisabet's arm to tug her along, around the other side of one of the standing rocks, down the hill as fast as they can manage.

There's a moment where Aloy thinks the man will let them go, slip away down the other side of the hill, but then his face turns into a grimace and he sneers, “It's the Anointed and her mother.”

The crowd dies down, silence before the inevitable storm, as moments later their voices raise and shout. Before Elisabet and Aloy reach the path, the look-out yells something about them making a run for it and –

Aloy tries to call for her Strider, but it's of no use. They can't get away, Nora clan members surrounding them on every side, all of them fueled by anger. They close in on them, balled fists, locked jaws, like a mob.

“She's tainted!” a woman not much older than Aloy herself shouts, making a grab for Elisabet's shoulder.

Anger flashes red before Aloy's eyes and she shoves her body between Elisabet and the Nora woman, still holding her hand tightly. “Don't you touch her,” she snarls, and the spike of fear in the woman's eyes gives her a warped sense of pleasure in the midst of the chaos.

“To the Matriarchs!” someone yells, and then they're all shouting it like a battle cry, more hands reaching for Elisabet, grabbing her, trying to pull her away from Aloy, and –

Something breaks inside of her. Before thinking on her actions, Aloy finds herself with her spear in hand, a guttural, animal-like bellow releasing itself from her throat.

The crowd pulls back. Stunned into silence. These are the people who shunned her, always kept her at an arm's length, only accepted her for her usefulness. Glinthawks. Waiting for a misstep. Ready to reap the carcasses.

“Let me through,” a new voice says, coming from behind the wall of faces twisted with anger and fear. “On behalf of War-Chief Sona, let me through.”

Tears spring to Aloy's eyes when Varl pushes his way into the human circle. She lowers the tip of her spear to the ground. “Help me,” she whispers to him as he stops before her.

“What happened?” he asks, and several voices start shouting before he commands them to be quiet. “I am speaking to the Anointed. Stay. Your. Tongues.”

“She fell into the ruins,” Aloy says, speaking quickly. “She does not understand, it was an accident. You know –”
“I saw the mother climb down the taint herself,” a man yells before Varl commands him to silence once more.

They were watching Elisabet.

“She isn't from here,” Aloy stresses, keeping her eyes set on Varl's face, afraid of what she'll find if she looks away. “She didn't know. Varl, please…”

Varl hasn't shown any sentiment to either party so far, acting the way Aloy would expect from a War-Chief's son. “The tribe has laws,” he says, slowly, but now, his eyes and his furrowed brow betray his sympathy, and he says, firm but not unkind, “The law must be obeyed. She must be taken to the Matriarchs.”

“No – ” Aloy wants to protest, tears starting to well up again, but Elisabet lays a hand on hers, the one holding her spear, and steps forward.

---

Aloy never thought she would ever be able to compare the inner court of Mother’s Watch to a bandit's nest.

Now, surrounded by Matriarchs and onlookers, standing next to Elisabet in the middle of the yard, she can feel the same kind of energy coursing through her as that just before a fight breaks out. No longer holding her spear, her nails bite into the palm of her hands.

More people have come to watch, some of them sitting atop the roofs of the wooden buildings. Like it's spectacle they've come to observe. Aloy remembers standing in the arena in Sunfall, having all those eyes on her. This isn’t much different.

She knows Varl is here somewhere too, but her eyes do not leave the figures of the High Matriarchs, raised above the rest on the steps leading up to the temple above. Teersa, Lansra and Jezza are arguing, their squabble rising above the low murmurs of the crowd.

Aloy can't make out what they're saying anymore. Too many voices. She can't bring herself to care about the arguments being made for or against Elisabet, because they are all wrong.

“Don't intervene,” Elisabet says next to her, softly. When Aloy looks over, she spots Elisabet's Focus glowing, and knows it must be GAIA, trying to do what Aloy has failed to so far. Find a way to get them out of here.

She grabs Elisabet's hand, holding on tightly. “Let GAIA help,” she says, unable to care about her desperate tone. “This isn't fair, you shouldn't be here.”

Elisabet squeezes her hand back, turning her head just so she can lock eyes for a second. “It's okay, Aloy,” she says. “If I've committed a crime by your tribe's standards, it needs to be dealt with. I'll be okay.”

How can she say that so calmly?

“Cast her out!” someone yells from the left flank, several voices rising in agreement before Sona demands silence again so the Matriarchs can deliberate.

Enough.

Aloy pulls away from Elisabet, striding forward, shoulders set and hands shaking. She pays no mind
to the onlookers' gasps, eyes fixed on the High Matriarchs, who have stopped quarreling and look to her in... surprise? Shock? It doesn't matter.

“Cast her aside, and I will go with her,” Aloy says, voice loud enough to echo through the yard.

“Aloy,” Teersa says, paying no mind to Lansra's hiss of protest as she moves down the steps, closer to Aloy. “We cannot ignore the rules of the tribe. They saw her enter the tainted ruins.”

“Then make her a Seeker!” she shouts, voice trembling with emotion. “You have shunned me for not having a mother up until the moment the Goddess spoke to me, and now I have her, you will cast her out –”

Her voice fails her as once more, tears threaten to fall from her eyes and her jaw clenches shut. When Teersa moves to comfort her by reaching out with her hand, she steps back. “Don’t,” she forces out. “Do not pretend to console me when you are about to take my only comfort from me.”

Hurt blooms on Teersa's face, making her look even older than she is. “I do not wish to do so,” the Matriarch says. “My only wish is to serve the Goddess and the tribe, including you, Aloy…”

“And the Goddess would want me to suffer?” Aloy spits out, tears running down her cheeks in anger. “I have been inside the ruins, there is no taint, no corruption –”

“Because you are a Seeker, Aloy,” Teersa interrupts. “The All-Mother protects you from it. We cannot protect your mother from the corruption she has already witnessed. We can only protect those who are still free from its touch.”

Looking around the courtyard, Aloy sees the many faces of the tribe, all of them angered by something they do not understand. They are not free from corruption, not when their ignorance causes them to act like this. Rost may have wanted her to care for the tribe, as they would care for her too, but this is not caring.

“Decide on your judgement,” Aloy says. “No matter the outcome, Elisabet – my mother and I will leave.”

Chatter erupts from the onlookers, unrest even Sona cannot put an end to. Teersa gasps, clasping her hands to her face, covering her mouth. Someone in the crowd call Aloy's name, and when she looks over she sees Teb and Varl, both with troubled expressions.

I’m sorry, she thinks to them, but this is bigger than the few people she can truly call friends in this tribe.

Taking Elisabet with her, Aloy makes her way to the foot of the stairs, where Lansra and Jezza still stand. “Step aside,” Aloy says. “My mother and I will gather our belongings from the temple.”

They make way and let them through, the only reaction Aloy would have tolerated at this point. Sounds of protest rise from the crowd, but she pays them no mind. Leaving the tribe behind, Aloy climbs the stairs to the temple, aware that it might be the last time she ever does.

Chapter End Notes

... soooo... Hope you enjoyed and see you soon. c’:
I just want to say thank you to everyone for the continued support, and to burbear for still putting up with me, lol. Thank you all so, so much. <3

I'm still on vacation (and a little writers' blocked hahaha, but I'm bashing my way through it) so next chapter should be up within a week, but for now, I'm not sure how much wifi I'll be able to get until I'm back home. Guess we'll find out together. :)

There isn't much left to pack up in Aloy's room. Her collection all fits bundled up inside the quilt Teb crafted her, the Banuk tapestries rolled around the bundle, and everything secured with twine rope, creating a single package for her to take with. She leaves the candles, and she already took her personal items back to Rost's cabin – her comb, her pelts, her weaponry and armor.

She finds Elisabet in the control room, back turned towards the door, scrolling through holo projections on the window. A cable is plugged in somewhere underneath her shirt, which looks a lot like the ones she wore in the old holo recordings. She's wearing loose fitted pants as well, her soaked Nora clothing next to her in a puddle on the floor.

“It's really gone,” Elisabet says, her voice a whisper in the empty room.

“Yes,” GAIA confirms, closing the holos when Elisabet leans forward to rest her hands on the console there, hanging her head. “Ted Faro was successful in the removal of APOLLO. There was nothing left.”

“I'm so sorry. I can't even begin to imagine what that must've been like for you.”

“Frightening,” GAIA answers. “However, I do not wish to recall these moments at this time. Given the circumstances, we should agree on a plan de campagne.”

“Right.” Shaking her head, as if she's trying to pull herself from her thoughts, Elisabet reaches to her side and unplugs the cable. “You don't need me to finish correcting your code. The remaining sub-functions can be recovered... at almost any facility, so long as there is a strong enough uplink connection.”

“Future upgrades may be installed onto your system using a similar method.”

Elisabet nods along with GAIA’s words, touching her fingers lightly to her Focus. “We'll get there.”

“Indeed,” GAIA says, and then, “In you, all things are possible.”

It's exactly the same phrase GAIA said to Aloy at the start of their journey together, but somehow it feels like it means something entirely different, something more, when said to Elisabet. As if she's intruding on a private matter, Aloy considers backing away, but then Elisabet turns around and spots her, and her eyes soften immediately.

“Oh, child,” Elisabet says, and everything about her draws Aloy in. Elisabet embraces her, holds her
tight, a hand coming up to stroke her hair. “What have they done to you?” Elisabet asks with such
tenderness Aloy's heart aches.

She shudders, half-mortified to find more tears forming behind her eyelids. Hasn't she cried enough,
today? But these are different tears, for a different reason.

“Did they cast you out?” is murmured into her ear.


Despite how she wished to keep her composure, she sobs, fingers clutching the fabric of Elisabet's
shirt. Oh, Mother, how her words seem to strike deep within her core, reaching parts of her that have
hurt for so long.

Rost always told her the tribe did what needed to be done, that the Matriarchs knew best and were to
be obeyed, even if Aloy couldn't understand it. Even if it felt unfair. He tried to tell her the
Matriarchs would never do something without reason. He may not have meant to do so, but it made
her feel she was at fault. As if she, somehow, even though she'd been a babe, had committed a crime
so heinous it warranted the way she was treated.

“What they did was wrong,” Elisabet continues, almost like she knows what Aloy is thinking. “You
were just a child.”

“Now they're going to cast you out,” Aloy says. “I'm sorry –!”

Elisabet hushes her gently. “Your tribe can't hurt me, Aloy. It's better this way. Imagine what they
would do if they found out what I really am.”

Aloy laughs despite herself, a harsh, choked sound. Then the tears are back, full force. She's right –
if the Nora ever discovered Elisabet's machine-like body...

A Nora would never kill a human without good cause, but a machine will never be human enough to
meet their standards. How ironic, given what they've based their religious system on.

“It's gonna be okay,” Elisabet says, pressing her lips to the side of Aloy's head, then stepping back so
she can touch a hand to Aloy's cheek, brush away tears with her thumb. “I'll be fine. You don't have
to leave your people –”

Aloy shakes her head with a fierceness that dislodges Elisabet's hand from her face, and she grips the
woman's shoulders. “No,” she says, aware of how frail she sounds. “They are not my people. I'll
come with you.”

She leaves the plea in her voice unspoken. Please don't make me stay behind.

Unwittingly, she remembers the last time she spoke to Rost – before entering Mother's Heart, before
the Proving. How she'd never imagined it would truly be her final chance to say anything to the man
who supported her entire world up until then.

“Together,” Elisabet says. She takes one of Aloy's hands from her shoulder and cups it in her own.
“We'll be okay.” And then, with a wry smile and a tight squeeze of her hands, says, “This isn't how
the world ends.”

Coming from the woman who actually lived through the complete destruction of all living things,
Aloy tries to draw strength from her words.

Elisabet embraces her once more before pulling away completely. “Let's show them we are unafraid and unmoved by their displays,” she says. “And keep our heads high when we leave. Don't let them get to you.”

Aloy nods, about to turn and gather her bundle of things when Elisabet holds her back with a light touch on her arm.

The woman looks deep into her eyes, and Aloy struggles to not avert her gaze at the intensity. “Don't let them get to you,” Elisabet repeats. “Not even through me.”

---

They ride for the North Gate at nighttime, having sorted out their belongings in Rost's cabin. Or rather, Aloy's, seeing as Elisabet doesn't truly own anything with the exception of her Focus and clothes after being given a pair of Aloy’s old pants and a simple, brown tunic. The sky is clear, stars shining bright next to a full moon, illuminating the road ahead in white light. The night's breeze sways bushes, leaves a chill on Aloy's skin.

The campfire at the gate is lit, a single figure seated beside it. As they come closer, their identity is revealed: Varl, with a grim look on his face. He stands, greeting them with a wave as Aloy brings the Strider in close to him.

“You're here,” Aloy says. She hadn't expected him, or anyone, to show up. Not after her words in the courtyard.

Varl gives her a smile, but his heart isn't in it. “Couldn't let you slip away without saying goodbye,” he says. He's holding something under his arm, a package of sorts. He hands it over, saying, “Teb made this for your mother. He couldn't be here, so he gave it to me.”

It's soft to the touch, warn even. Aloy passes the bundle on to Elisabet, who takes care unrolling it. Teb's gift is a cloak, the edges made of fox fur, leather covering the back to stave off the rain, the lining made of fabric to keep warm. A gift worth countless shards in the Sacred Land or Ban-Ur, where the weather can be unpredictable and cold.

“Thank you,” Elisabet says, her tone giving away the fact that she too understands the value of Teb's generosity. “I'll remember his kindness.”

Varl seems conflicted for a moment, looking away from Elisabet to meet Aloy's eyes, but then he turns back to her and says, “I will let him know.”

“How long did they give her?” Aloy asks.

“A year,” Varl says. “High Matriarch Teersa was against it up until the end. Lansra wanted five years.”

No surprises there, Aloy thinks, but it still stings. She'd wanted to believe in Lansra's change of heart, the way her opinion on Aloy had changed when she became their Anointed.

“And yet, here you are,” she says.

“Many of us do not agree with the judgment,” Varl says. Although he may not admit it when asked, a part of him changed when he followed Aloy into the final battle against HADES. A part that outweighs his loyalty to the tribe and the Matriarchs, as he now knowingly commits taboo, speaking
Not knowing what else she can say, Aloy settles for, “You have a good heart, Varl,” and means it. “Tell Teb I'll miss him.”

Varl ducks his head, performing a small bow before her. He isn't doing it in the same manner he usually does to mock the people who worship Aloy, the gesture now being much more deliberate and sincere. “If there’s ever a need, I would be honored to fight by your side again, Aloy,” he says, and Aloy can feel her throat closing up in response.

“I will call upon you,” she says, the words thick on her tongue. She meets Varl's eyes one last time, then prompts her Strider to walk through the gate at a slow pace.

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The outside of the Embrace is an entirely new territory for Elisabet, who is careful to keep both hands on Aloy’s waist as they ride further down into the fields of the Sacred Land. Aloy guides them around the nearby machines, keeping their distance so as not to disturb them. High above, the stars highlight the sky, surrounded by a rich, ever deepening blue.

Both Elisabet and GAIA are quiet, and Aloy herself can't think of anything to start a conversation. What can she say? She knew this day would come, the day when she'd leave the tribe again, but she'd never imagined the way it happened. Outcast for a year.

It doesn't matter that she wasn't personally cast out because she might as well have been, just for refusing to shun Elisabet. Her hands grip the Strider's mane harder than strictly necessary. Silent tears leak from her eyes, forming slowly and gliding down her face without resistance, unaccompanied by sobs or a change of breath.

It's grief, leaving her body as the Embrace falls further behind them. Those final strings keeping her to the tribe, severed. Teb, Varl, Olara, Teersa... All the people who stood up for her, who disobeyed the rules and spoke to her while she was still an outcast – she already misses them fiercely, wishes she could have said goodbye in a proper manner.

As for the tribe itself, with its stifling rules and customs, the constant fear of being tainted by anything left behind from the Ancient World... there's not an ounce of regret in her heart as the distance grows.

The towering remnants of Devil's Thirst appear on the horizon, accompanied by the Tallneck's stomping feet. Aloy catches Elisabet's soft gasp when they draw nearer and see it moving through the ruins, moonlight catching off its dish-like head. A smile tugs on her lips, and she discreetly wipes any tears left off her face.

“It's a Tallneck,” she says to Elisabet, keeping her voice low. “It isn't hostile, it just... patrols and sends out communications.”

“I noticed,” the woman replies, speaking in no more than a whisper. “I caught its signal a while back. It's... magnificent.”

They ride along the river, seeking higher grounds. There's a natural bridge across made by fallen debris where they enter the old city. Aloy keeps scanning the area with her Focus, aware of the machines that tend to lurk in the bushes and shadows.

Somewhere at the edge of Devil's Thirst is a half collapsed building, where iron and steel keep a slab of stone leaned against the inner wall to create an instant shelter. She's slept there before, and has
never seen a machine come close to it, which is why she keeps coming back. Even now, as she scans, there are no patrols indicated nearby.

It's empty, overgrown with vines, the perfect place to stay hidden from sight and elements. Aloy dismounts, checks the shelter one last time before letting Elisabet join her. The inside is cozy, as far as collapsed ruins go, with no room to stand, and they're forced to sit close to one another, sharing warmth by proximity.

She can hear her Strider walk off, starting to graze further up the hill while she and Elisabet each eat a small amount of dried fruits and cured meat before turning in for the night. Although doing without the comforts of Rost's cabin, something inside of Aloy eases, a familiar feeling coming over her as she lays herself to rest.

---

Her dreams are filled with flashing eyes, swarming mobs of hands and teeth, clashing, reaching for her. The stone arena of Sunfall overshadows her, eyes watching far above but this time, Elisabet isn't among them. Instead, when Aloy turns around, she finds the woman at her back, weaponless.

With no hesitation, Aloy shields her, wielding her spear to guard anyone off, until the earth starts to rumble and a form rises from the ashes covering the arena, guns and metal and smoke –

The Deathbringer's claws pull its body from the ground, its red sensors locking on to her and Elisabet, grinding gears and turning weapons, and Aloy's chest is an empty cave, only fear resonating within. Not for her, but for Elisabet, who stands and moves past Aloy, in front of the Deathbringer, her face showing clarity and conviction like a stone bust, carefully carved into her skin.

Aloy tries to reach her, to pull her back. Aloy can fight this thing, this monster, but her feet have sunken into the stone below, and she can't pull herself free in time.

“Do not intervene,” Elisabet says, and the Deathbringer fires –

NO.

Her body jolts, her breath quick and uncontrolled. *All-Mother, no, please* – Aloy pushes the cape, Teb's cape, off her neck and upper body, looking around blindly in the dark until she spots the shape of Elisabet sitting next to her.

She's okay.

*Just a dream.*

Boneless relief floods her as she sinks back into the cape that was wrapped around her body. She holds back a dry sob, shielding her eyes with her arm, the crook of her elbow resting above the bridge of her nose.

She jumps a little when a hand – Elisabet's – reaches out to hold her own before relaxing again.

“Nightmare?” Elisabet asks, whispering, sounding as though she's been fully awake the entire time.

Aloy nods, not yet trusting her own voice.

“Go back to sleep, Aloy,” Elisabet says, keeping hold of her hand, and Aloy wants to protest, to stay awake and keep an eye out, check the perimeter...
Bright morning light streams in through the cracks in the stone slab, bathing Aloy's face with it. She rolls onto her side, blinking as she wakes, and finds Elisabet still in the same spot. Aloy goes to sit up when she hears it. Stumbling, mechanical whirs, clashing of metal, and angered shouting, outside, not too far from them.

Aloy is already moving to her knees when Elisabet stops her.

“A fight broke out,” Elisabet says, softly. Her Focus glows, blue light playing off the sides of the shelter. “A big machine and a group of humans.”

She swallows back the immediate I know, aware that Elisabet isn't as used to this as she is, and instead quietly gathers her bow and arrows. “I'll go help out,” she says, pushing the cape to the side to create some working space for her putting her gear on.

“Be careful,” Elisabet tells her before Aloy crawls out the shelter, keeping her head low.

It's a Ravager fighting against a group of bandits, the presence of both a surprise to Aloy. They do not belong here, so deep into the Sacred Land. She's about to leave them to it when she sees a person, a third party, stuck between the machine and the bandits.

The bandits are playing with whoever it is they've trapped, swiping out towards them, driving them closer to the Ravager. Looking more closely Aloy can see their Nora garb – a Brave, all by themself? Even vastly outnumbered, the Brave manages to keep the bandits on their toes, juggling the line between defense and offense with trained precision.

Still, nothing can last forever in an unfair fight, and a blow to the head causes the Brave to stumble, one of the bandits moving in for the kill.

Aloy has already moved in closer with a drawn bow, firing off an arrow that runs through the bandit's chest, and the would-be attacker trips. Her second arrow strikes his shoulder, ensuring he won't be getting up anytime soon, but now she's brought attention to herself, and some of the bandits cheer, seemingly delighted with another plaything.

She runs off to the side, maneuvering between their arrows and diving back into cover. One of their archers is a bad shot, a fact Aloy isn't planning to change by aiming one of her own arrows through the back of his hand.

The ground shakes when the Ravager skids to a halt near her, close enough that she could override – but she isn't fast enough, her spear at her back, and the Ravager is still focused on the Brave, growling in anticipation as its claws dig into the earth, readying itself to pounce. At the same time, the bandits are closing in from the other side of the clearing, and Aloy has to pick her target, knowing that she can only take one target down in time.

She aims for the cannon on the Ravager's back, marking it with a tearblast arrow when she notices a flash of bright red hair in the distance before bringing her attention back to the machine at hand. The arrow explodes, the cannon coming loose and the Ravager howls, stumbling, and turns its eyes to her.

Rolling out of the way, Aloy narrowly avoids being struck by the Ravager's claws, and follows up by aiming arrows at its eyes. She misses a few times, but when she strikes, the Ravager shakes its head in rage, temporarily blinded.

The cannon, get the cannon.
She sprints towards the weapon, skidding along the ground to reach it in time. She grabs it, flings herself around and fires, blasting away at the Ravager, striking it mid-air as it lunges for her. Already wounded from the ongoing battle, the machine falters off to Aloy's side, and she blasts the Ravager a few more times, for certainty.

About to turn her attention to the bandits, her Focus shows the cannon's empty, and she casts it aside. So much for the easy way. She takes her bow again, Focus marking nearby targets –

Their attention has shifted away from her and the fallen Nora, their cries of delight now ones of terror. Most of the bandits are already on the ground, bright, flashing armor standing in their midst, a knife glinting in the morning light.

All Aloy can do before the fight is over is send off a few arrows, but she refrains. Instead, she stands back and watches as Nil does what the man loves to do most – making the metal of his knife sing and blood rain around him.

Chapter End Notes

It's Nil! He's finally here! I know some of you were really, really hoping he'd show up - so here he is. :) He'll be given more screen time in the next chapter. I really hope you guys enjoyed it, and I'm honestly a little nervous about writing Nil. c';
Holy shit you guys, 200 kudos?? Thank you all so much! <3

Also I'm sorry for being a bit late with the upload. I just got back from vacation and immediately got a cold and a fever to go with it. c': So here's the next chapter!

As always, much love to burbear for beta reading and supporting me.

Sobeck Journal, 12-03-41

In December of ’65 we were coming to terms with the complete atmospheric collapse. The rebreathers issued to the military and ZD personnel turned into absolute necessities for anyone outside the assigned safety structures. It changed circumstances from war zone to pre-apocalyptic. Further rationing of supplies, strict windows for outside-of-shelter activities, and my days seeing more and more goodbyes from different corners of the world.

I don’t know what happened to most of my own family. I was too busy running the ZD Project to keep in touch. The only one whose t.o.d. I got a notice of was Uncle Todd, having died of cancer a week before the hospital was overrun.

Couldn’t figure out whether to be sad or relieved.

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Sobeck Journal, 12-04-41

It’s gone. So much knowledge, lost. Why would he do that?

Why?

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Sobeck Journal, 12-05-41

Cast out for climbing down an old facility. I shouldn’t be so surprised, given the conservative nature of the clan and what I’ve come to know re: Aloy’s upbringing. They shunned her from birth up until not too long ago it seems, with the exception of this Rost figure, who I presume is a surrogate father and/or teacher. It explains some of the things I’ve been wondering, such as her strained relationship with the tribe and the at times standoffish or point-blank behavior she exhibits.

I’m aware that’s hypocritical coming from me, the Homecoming Queen of Sarcasm and Purposeful Self-Exclusion from Social Settings, so it might well be a hereditary trait from the Sobeck line. However, I doubt it, given Aloy’s reactions to the tribe, combined with what she showed during and after the hearing. Separation Anxiety? Ostracism has long-lasting and trauma-evoking effects, which is why there was all the buzz around those social self-learning bots for the excluded in the ’50s, and I don’t have to be a psychologist to see the emotional scarring left behind in Aloy.
But she's strong. Credit where credit's due, I think Rost, whoever he was, tried to do right by Aloy. I hope she'll one day feel ready to tell me about him, but I won't push it. Let her come to me when the time's right for her, that's what's important.

---

Nil's gait is casual and slow as he walks by the bandits' bodies, ripping out arrows from them only to plunge them into their heads again, to put a stop to their screams for good. His armor and skin is covered in blood from arterial spray that struck him during the onslaught. He must be quite pleased with the outcome.

He pauses in his executions, and shouts, “Aloy, slayer of machines, to meet again on the battlefield –!” The body at his feet gurgles, a hand grabbing on to his leg in a final desperate move, taking Nil's attention away from Aloy momentarily. He raises his foot and plants it on the fallen bandit's throat, grinding down.

Aloy averts her eyes, but the sickening gasps and wet chokes that follow reach her ears nonetheless. “And so you lived,” she says when the bandit has fallen silent and Nil approaches her. She keeps her gaze fixed on the horizon a moment longer, willing away the nauseous quivers of her stomach.

Nil clucks his tongue. “No need to sound so surprised,” he says, absentmindedly holding his bloodied knife in hand. “It was inevitable, you and I. We're bound by the same tune.”

About to deny it, Aloy shakes her head when she's interrupted by a low groan coming from somewhere in the tall grass.

Nil springs to action, taking steady strides towards the origin of the sound, and calls over his shoulder, “Seems like someone tried to escape that tune.”

Using her Focus to scan the area, the bushes light up with the purple shape of a body. The Brave, alive. “Wait!” Aloy sets off in a jog, determined to catch up to Nil before it's too late. “Whoever they are, you cannot kill them,” she says. “They're part of my tribe.”

Not stopping until he's standing over the Brave, Nil makes his disappointment palpable, his drooped shoulders giving the impression of a child being denied their wishes. “Are you sure he isn't another maggot, wriggling in the dust?” he asks, giving her a coy look from under his eyelashes, willing to pretend he hasn't seen the Nora garb on the man if she'll do the same.

But she can't, even when she looks into the face of the Brave – the half that isn't covered in paint is drenched in blood from the head wound he received earlier – and sees mutual recognition in his eyes.

“I know him,” she says, trying to will away any regret as the words come out.

Resh greets her with a snarl, blood bubbling on his lower lip and he spits once, twice, not caring if the crimson spittle hits Aloy when he does. “Tainted wretch,” he says, voice gruff. Just like when they first met, Aloy thinks.

She squats down, bringing herself in closer. “Unless you've been blessed a Seeker, I'd mind that tone,” she says, squaring her jaw. Devil's Thirst is a place off limits to other Nora, the ruins considered haunted by the Old Ones’ spirits and misdeeds, something the former War-Chief would never forget. “Thought your time with the Nora had come to an end.”

His eyes flashing, Resh bares his teeth and grinds out, “I chose exile. The tribe may have forsaken reason, but I serve the Sacred Land, not the Matriarchs whom you've corrupted with your very presence.”
“Stings, doesn't it, that the All-Mother favors me,” Aloy says, narrowing her eyes at the man. His wounds will need addressing soon. Although they're not lethal in and of themselves, the cut on his head and the other unseen scrapes might get infected. Festering wounds have brought down many warriors –

She jerks back with a yelp, stumbling to her feet after a sudden mouthful of saliva and blood is ejected onto her face. Keeping her eyes shut, she uses her fingers to wipe down her eyes and cheeks, pressing down against her skin to remove as much as possible at once.

“Sure you don't want me to – ” she hears Nil begin to speak, relaxed despite the implied murdering of Resh.

“No,” she says quickly. “You leave him be. Just... keep an eye on him,” she adds, turning her back on them as she blinks hard, trying not to give much thought to her now blurred vision.

“Aloy,” Elisabet's voice cuts in, coming from seemingly nowhere. “Behind you.”

She turns around, and there, on top of the hillside, is Elisabet. The clothes she's wearing – Aloy's old tunic and pants – match with the surroundings. The brown colors blend in well among the tall grass and rocks, but her short red braids flow in the wind, drawing attention not just from Aloy, but Nil as well.

Aloy taps into her Focus, stepping away from the others so they won't hear her speak clearly. “What are you doing?” she asks. “It isn't safe – ”

“I checked the area, Aloy,” Elisabet says, moving down towards them. “There's no one left.” From this distance, Aloy can see her lips move, but the sound is still clearly coming through her Focus. Even when she met other Focus users, she's never been part of an exchange like this. It's... strange. Useful, perhaps.

“We have to help Resh – the man who was injured,” she tells Elisabet, who nods as she comes within hearing range.

“Show me what we're working with,” Elisabet says, no longer channeling her voice through the Focus.

After Aloy gestures at Resh, she wipes a final hand over the side of her face, the palm coming away with only traces of blood. Nil approaches her, a curious twinkle in his eyes.

“You never mentioned an older sibling,” he says, and adds to it by giving Elisabet a very unsubtle once-over.

“She's not my sister,” Aloy says, and Resh laughs, loud and unchecked.

Elisabet, who was attempting to tend to Resh, asks, “Can you stand?”

Resh ignores her and leans onto his side, propping his body up and keeping his eyes on Aloy. “I heard rumors of a mother's return. What did you do, wretch, ask a Carja to impersonate her? Did the Matriarchs finally come to their senses when they cast her out?” He slaps away the hand Elisabet's holding out towards him. “Look at her – she isn't Nora.”

Elisabet seems unfazed by his words, leaning back on her haunches to observe him, but Aloy's heart aches. Despite the fact that they've been outcast, despite her own feelings with regards to no longer belonging to the tribe – she aches for Elisabet, for how the world she helped create does not accept her. If only they knew...
“Where is her mark,” Resh barks, glancing at Elisabet before turning his gaze away from her again, red flecks of spit flying from his lips. “Where are her accomplishments? Nowhere, for she does not belong to the Nora. A lie you crafted, you corrupted child! What will it take for you to leave?”

“Calm down,” Elisabet says with far more restraint than Aloy feels at the moment. “We can’t help you if you’re – ”

“Oh Mother,” he interrupts her. “Do not tempt me to speak to an outcast.”

Aloy's head is warm, too warm, her cheeks heating as her breath quickens. How dare –

“Aloy.”

She's unaware of having taken a step forward until she finds Elisabet's hand physically pushing her back. Restless, she backs away from Resh, but can't bring herself to stop moving altogether, almost circling Resh from a distance.

Resh grins at her, teeth bare. He's missing a few, the gums a dark red where a tooth is absent. “Do you pretend to be a family, sullyng the sanctity of motherhood?” he asks, mocking her. “You'll never know true acceptance because you will never belong.”

“Where were you when we fought in Meridian, to protect the Sacred Land from the machines?” Aloy shouts back. “You deserted your clan in a time of need, over a childish feud – you are without honor and valor, unworthy of your title – !”

“My title was earned,” Resh counters. “I am the one who was deserted when the Matriarchs crowned you their savior. I was the only one willing see you for the taint you are, the evil raised within our midst. They should have left you outside the gates when they found you, let the Old Ones decide your fate – unhand me!”

Resh struggles while Elisabet pulls the man to his feet, but she doesn't release her hold on his arm. Instead, Aloy can see her Focus glow as Elisabet scans Resh.

“No major injuries,” she says in a matter of fact manner. “A sprained ankle and a light concussion. He'll live.”

“Goddess protect me from the filth,” Resh spits before turning his attention back to Aloy, looking at her with wild eyes. “At least this outcast doesn't reek of the same corruption. It was your cries that angered the machines, that caused the Derangement. All the men and women we lost, it's all on you – !”

His tirade ends in a pained cry when Elisabet maneuvers the arm she's holding behind his back with surprising ease, wrist up towards his neck.

“I suggest you stop talking,” Elisabet says, the tightness in her voice betraying her calm exterior.

For once, Resh seems willing to comply, if only because of the angles his body keeps twisting to relieve tension on his shoulder.

“Not very grateful, is he,” Nil says, following Aloy as she puts a little distance between her and Resh. Space she needs to think clearly, without the haze of anger clouding her mind. Nil manages to catch her eyes again, his lashes almost fluttering when he says, “Is a machine that leaves the herd still part of its family?”

“Nil,” Aloy warns, then casts a look at the sky. Far away, past Devil's Thirst and Mother's Crown,
dark clouds are forming. “We need to leave.”

Even if the weather wasn't about to turn, there's also the constant threat of machines finding them. Scrappers are always nearby, searching for metal scraps to convert into reusable materials for the Cauldrons, and the Ravager's body won't stay undiscovered for long.

“There's a place not far from here, somewhere they can take care of him,” Aloy says, nodding towards Resh. No matter how much she dislikes the man, she can't find it in herself to leave him in the open fields, to be picked apart by the Scrappers or worse. Resh can't fight, not in his current state, and the other outcasts, the ones that banded together in the former bandits' nest, will try to help him as much as they can. The fact that the inhabitants are outcasts, with some of them maybe holding a grudge towards the ex-War-Chief... well.

That's just too bad.

“What will you do, Nil?” Aloy asks, not sure what to expect from the man. He has never been one to hang around long after a fight, although this time seems different. “Will you ride with us to the old bandit camp?”

He tilts his head to the side, his gaze reminding Aloy of a bird of prey. “I might,” he says. “Will you tell the story of Aloy, and what happened since the battle? Your absence has been noticed, as you can tell by the bandits scurrying back over the borders like vermin.”

She's never felt a particular kinship with Nil, his obsession with killing too unlike her own stance on taking lives out of necessity, but this once she's glad he'll join them. Of course she would be able to handle Resh on her own with Elisabet, but the bigger they are in number, the less trouble she predicts for now.

“I will tell the story,” she says, agreeing to Nil's terms. “Tonight, at the campfire.”

Pleased, Nil gives her a half-bow. “Then, we ride.”

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Finding a group of Striders isn't difficult in the Sacred Land, especially not near Devil's Thirst, where machines rule the landscape, having split their numbers into groups according to their needs. Unspoken boundaries all machines respect, giving each other space to work on their tasks.

By listening in on her Focus, Aloy can hear them speaking to one another, communicating in a language she still can't fully understand. She can only detect shifts in mood among the machines, which doesn't mean much, given they make their moods known easily with the shifting color of their eyes.

The hardest part of overriding three different Striders? Separating them enough from each other so that they don't notice their companion's change in attitude.

Still, Aloy has had practice, and it doesn't take her too long. Mounting one of the Striders, Aloy rides them back to where she left Elisabet and Nil with Resh. Passing the fallen Ravager, Aloy spots the body of a different Strider, one that's been overridden before.

Her Strider.

So that's where it went.

Most of her Striders don't stick around for too long. She either loses track of them, has to maneuver
terrain the Strider's hooves can't manage, or they're destroyed by other machines. There's no reason to get attached to a single machine.

But when she finds herself riding with the same Strider for a while, she notices how every machine reacts a little differently from the previous one. How they attune to her demands, start listening more carefully to her commands. She almost doesn't dare admit it, even to herself, but sometimes it's like they have individual personalities. A different memory log that dictates their innate reactions to water or fire or humans.

The one she's riding now seems stiff compared to the one that lies destroyed in the valley, and although she knows it's pointless, she feels a pang of loss at the sight of her previous ride, its side crushed inwards, its armored plates riddled with Ravager claw marks.

Nil and Elisabet have moved into cover, hidden away behind a few standing walls of an old building. Resh is still with them, seated on the ground. Jumping off her Strider, Aloy joins her companions inside.

Despite her gut feeling urging her to keep her distance, she turns to Resh first, saying, “There's a storm coming, and an encampment not far from here. They have healers and shelter. We can take you with us.” Seeing the stern set of his brows, she adds, “Your chances of surviving out here are slim and you know this.”

While he may hate her, Resh isn't stupid. He agrees to join them, although begrudgingly. Nil offers to ride with him, to make sure he doesn't fall off the Strider, but Aloy denies him this. She can't trust Nil not to accidentally lose Resh along the way.

Instead, the ex-War-Chief is stuck riding with Elisabet, because of the unspoken agreement that Resh and Aloy should keep as much space between the two of them as possible. Resh is clearly fighting his Nora impulses, having to mount a machine, but he manages to do it without accepting Elisabet's help.

The ride to the outcasts' camp seems longer than usual, with a heavy silence weighing down on the group.

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Their arrival at the camp is followed by a whirlwind of activity throughout the settlement. Aloy can hear her name being passed from the lookout to the gatekeeper, and so on and so on. It doesn't take long before Jom and a handful of others appear at the entrance, on the other side of the bridge, and offer to help them get across.

Aloy almost misses Resh being taken away to the healers by two outcasts while Jom speaks to her in excited tones, asking her about her travels and how glad everyone is to see her. It warms her, and the events from earlier drift to the back of her mind when Jom guides her, Elisabet, and Nil to the campfire.

Instead of it being outside, Jom leads her down into the old ruins, to a hall where they've reinforced the walls and ceiling with wooden supports and beams. Hides and tapestries decorate the stone walls, as do colorful murals.

While the sides of the hall are split into smaller areas, some with bedrolls and personal belongings, others with supplies or weapons, the center of the room is reserved for a large campfire, one big enough for a group to sit around. In the ceiling above the campfire there's a hole to let the smoke out, and – as Aloy squints her eyes to see more clearly up there – a large leather hide on a wooden
construction keeps rain from falling into the fire.

A young woman, older than Aloy but younger than Elisabet, watches over a large cooking pot, and Jom introduces her to them as Omina, his mate. Up close, Aloy can tell by the curve of her belly that she's pregnant. They must feel safe, she thinks to herself.

She tries to imagine what it would be like to have a child of her own, but can't. Where would they live? How would she take care of it when she spends so much time on her own? And even if she did have a home, who would look after it when she's away?

Is this why Elisabet never had a child in the old world?

Jom and Omina offer them a place to sit at the campfire and give them bread and fruit and different meats, a small feast. Elisabet sits down next to Aloy, and Nil does the same on her other side, a little further away.

As rain starts to pour outside, more and more outcasts come sit at the fire. It doesn't take long for one of them to ask Aloy for her story – the tale of the girl with the flame red hair who rides machines, who saved Meridian and all the lands around it. She protests it with a smile, until she lets herself be convinced into telling it.

It's a long tale, one she's told so many times before she knows it by heart – the version she shares with others, that is. The one without Elisabet, without Faro, the one where Sylens only gets a mention as the one who helped her escape Sunfall's arena, and not even by name.

She leaves out most details concerning herself and the Nora, or how the Proving Massacre happened exactly – just that she was there, and they were attacked. She doesn't mention Rost.

The tale emphasizes the hunts, the many beasts she has brought down. How she hunted alongside Talanah, Sunhawk of the Hunter's Lodge, in the days of her predecessor, and how they slew Redmaw together. How tracking the killers of the Proving Massacre lead her beyond Sunfall, and deep into the jungles under Meridian.

And when she finally reaches the part where she faces Helis, the group is hanging on her lips, devouring every word she speaks. Despite not being as grand as taking down a Deathbringer, this is the part everyone loves – the moment Aloy avenges all those fallen young Braves.

Like every other time she's told the story, the actual memories haunt her as well, and she struggles to continue talking, stumbling here and there. It brings her peace knowing the people always seem to think it's because of the battle to come, the one with the Deathbringers at the gates of Meridian.

By the end, they all clap, and Aloy stands to deliver a short bow to her audience before sitting down again. Satisfied, most of the people start conversations among themselves. Only Nil keeps his eyes locked on her, and it's not hard to know why.

“And so Aloy returned to the Sacred Land,” he says, as if he's telling the story himself. They all finished eating a while ago, and Nil has been keeping his hands busy with his knife and a piece of wood, slowly carving it into a small statue. “I am here and it is night. Tell me what happens next,” he says, making sure she sticks to her promise.

“I went home,” Aloy says, glad she no longer has to raise her voice to be heard by everyone. “I rested.”

“Dull,” Nil says, flicking a piece of wood off his knife. “The Nora called you motherless wherever I asked, so tell me, was she waiting for you?” He finishes his sentence by looking at Elisabet, who left
Aloy's side to help Omina when the story ended.

“Not at first,” Aloy admits. She tries to pick her words carefully, and feels more vulnerable than she'd like. “I found her, or she found me, but I had never met her before.”

Nil observes her, his eyes taking her in until the point where she's beyond uncomfortable. She feels naked, her stomach exposed, like he can strike her neck without her even offering. “You were forged under the same Sun,” he says. She's about to ask what that means when he continues, “Born carrying the same song and flame. You and I, we share a song –”

“I don't believe –”

“ – but what you share with the woman you call your mother is more than that.”

Aloy falls silent, her protests dying on her lips. “What do you see?” she asks instead.

“An excellent warrior,” he says, and then, shifting his gaze back onto Elisabet, “immense potential. Even without weapons, there is a general among us.”

It’s too much, too close to the truth. Conversations stop and heads turn when Aloy stands, suddenly. “I need air,” she says, mostly to Nil, but loud enough for a few onlookers to hear as well.

Nil nods and lets her leave, turning back to his wood carving.

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The rain hasn't let up.

Aloy jogs from shelter to shelter until she finds one at the edge of the camp, a lean-to with a wooden stump under it. The perfect place to sit, with no one around except for a lone lookout in one of the towers.

Her head feels heavy. It always does after telling her tale. While for her audience it's an adventure the likes of which they've never experienced themselves, she gets to relive her memories, even as she tells a heavily edited version. The end of the final battle always leaves the audience joyous and overwhelmed, the great evil defeated.

But when she says those last words, Aloy's chest aches, and there's a gaping hole inside of her, a reminder of the emptiness she felt standing on top of the mesa after using Elisabet's name and rank to end the fight with HADES. Faro's machines were once again silent, but none of it –

Nothing she did would bring back those they lost. The Carja and Oseram who fought next to her, the Banuk who traveled for days on end to help out. The Nora who looked past their own discomforts and did what was right –

She can still see their broken bodies from when she dragged herself along the path, following HADES' trail of destruction. So many of them covered in blood, crying out for help, for death, for mercy... and the machines that never stopped reaping their lives.

The scale of the event was tenfold that of the Proving Massacre – a thousandfold – but the beating of her heart, the scent of shit and sweat and fear that soured the air was all too familiar.

And then... she's back there, held in Rost's arms, pulled close. The warm blood on her arm, the one pressed against his wound. She tries to look at him but her head keeps rolling back, her mind slipping in and out of consciousness.
He... pushes her...

Heavy footsteps make Aloy lift her head, a large shape moving right at her through the rain. Her heart races, blood rushing through her ears when she stands, but she isn't quick enough –

Resh grabs her garb at the hemline, pulling the fabric tight around her neck. “You filthy liar,” he spits in her face, eyes wide and mad. “Spreading your lies, your deceit.” His other hand joins the first, fingers digging into the side of her throat, thumb pressing down on her windpipe.

She's choking, trying to pull his hands off of her but the attempt is halfhearted at best, the cold holding her in place. Tension builds above the bridge of her nose and behind her eyes. Years of training abandon her in seconds.

“They call you their savior, but you will bring death to all of us Nora,” Resh's voice thunders in her ears, and at the edges of her vision she can see white snow and a bright light, Helis' teeth as he grins, and the glint of steel –

**TURN YOUR FACE TO THE SUN, CHILD.**

With a shove against her chest she's free from Resh's hands. She doubles over, falling to her knees as she coughs and splutters, trying to breathe too fast, her throat aching.

“You try touching her again,” says Elisabet's voice, followed by a pained cry coming from Resh. “You fucking try and I'll make you regret it.”

Aloy looks up to see Elisabet standing over Resh, holding his arm to his back like she did earlier, and the man is on his knees as well. There's fear in his eyes, quickly replaced by anger.

“All-Mother knows the Devil's child will bring destruction to all she touches,” he sneers.

Aloy can't see Elisabet's face, but she can sense her anger as the muscles under her tunic tighten. A crack follows, one Aloy has learned to recognize anywhere, and she flinches. The sound of bone breaking. At the same time, Resh howls.

After a beat of silence, one wherein Resh and Aloy both try to regain their breath, Elisabet releases Resh’s arm, and the man curls in on himself, cradling the hand she was holding to his chest.

*She broke his wrist.*

*Oh Mother...*

Aloy has witnessed someone breaking their bones before, or alternatively, seen someone's bones being broken – but never like this. Never with barely any movement at all. Never in a way that made it seem so easy and effortless.

Elisabet hasn't moved yet, but Aloy can see her face now. There's nothing there. No anger, no shock. Almost as if she can't even see Resh in front of her, cowering.

A nervous hum ignites in Aloy’s chest, her heart beating adrenaline through her veins, giving her newfound energy and cold, sweaty hands.

All the commotion attracts attention from the outcasts, and Aloy sees them coming closer, the red plumes of Nil’s headdress visible among them. The rain hasn't let up but that doesn't deter them, human curiosity a strong motivator. She's can't let them see her, she can't –
Aloy struggles to her feet, ignores Elisabet calling her name, and looks to the bridge, the one leading outside the camp.

She runs.
I've been pretty busy and very, very stuck writing this story, so it's a little on the late side again! I'm considering giving myself two weeks to kind of get the story on the rails again, to be honest, but we'll see where I'm at next week. :) I also had to start doing job interviews etc. because now that I'm no longer a student I better get an actual paying job lol.

So here's the next chapter! As always, many thanks to burbear!

There's a tree that looks like it's weeping, growing next to the path leading up to the bridge of the camp, close to where Aloy and Nil went over their approach when they took out their first bandit camp together. It's there that Aloy sits now, under the hanging leaves and branches, the tall grass hugging her body as she keeps an eye on the bridge and its glowing, orange lights.

A calm came over her, not long after sitting down here, and she's numb in both body and mind. Like a blade without edge. Her arms are soaked, her skin pale and cold. She pinches the skin of her arm between her thumb and forefinger, and she can feel it, but far away. Muted.

She hardly notices GAIA's presence but at the same time isn't surprised when the AI speaks her name. “Are you all right?” GAIA asks.

“Yes,” she answers, then frowns when she reconsiders GAIA's question. “I... don't know. I feel strange.”

“Dr. Sobeck wishes to speak to you,” GAIA says.

Aloy doesn't answer.

“Would it be all right for Elisabet to come speak with you?” GAIA asks.

Oh.

She clears her throat, dragging herself back from the nothingness inside her head. “Yeah, that's fine,” she says. Does she sound like herself?

It feels like she's only blinked twice before Elisabet is crossing the bridge towards her, holding a bowl and cloth in her hands. Another blink, and she's kneeling down in front of Aloy, setting the bowl to the side.

“Hello, Aloy,” Elisabet says, calm and gentle. The exact opposite of how she acted before, in the camp. “I'm... sorry. Did I scare you?”

She shakes her head, a small movement that takes more effort than she's used to. Why would she be afraid of Elisabet? Because of her tone of voice? She's heard Elisabet being angry before, in the holos, and it wasn't directed at her...
Resh's hand.

Elisabet asks because of her actions. Aloy tries to remember how she felt watching Elisabet standing over Resh, but comes up blank. Was she afraid?

“What happened to Resh?” Aloy asks instead.

It's GAIA who answers when Elisabet averts her eyes, looking off into the distance. “Medical staff is taking care of Resh. He will be fine.”

“Won't be doing any huntin' for a while,” Elisabet grumbles, her hands tightening on the cloth she's still holding.

“You broke his wrist,” Aloy says. “How?”

“It was by accident.” Elisabet’s eyes shift back to Aloy’s. “I'm not used to the strength this body has, and... I need you to understand that I would never hurt you like that.”

“I believe you,” Aloy says, after noticing how Elisabet is still looking at her, waiting for a confirmation. The thought of Elisabet hurting her hadn't even crossed Aloy's mind. It isn't something she can imagine happening, either.

Something in Elisabet's posture relaxes, her shoulders drooping as though a weight has been lifted from them. “Good,” she says. “Good. How... how do you feel, Aloy?”

Hollowed out. Everything is still numb, her arms, her legs... her thoughts. Covered by a fog, a haze that makes things seem so far and distant even when they're right in front of her.

“There's a part of me missing,” is what she ends up saying. “I don't feel my... I don't feel.”

Elisabet's Focus glows softly, and then Elisabet hums. GAIA must've chosen to say something for her ears only. Should Aloy be bothered by that? Before she has time to think on it, Elisabet shifts and moves a little closer, one hand resting on the bowl of water she brought with her.

“It's normal,” Elisabet says. “You were under a lot of stress and sometimes, this is how the body deals with that. How's the throat?”

Aloy swallows out of reflex. She can still feel hands touching her, pressing against her throat. A dull, lingering pain in her neck where Resh's fingers dug into her skin. But worse than anything else is her scar, burning and stinging like someone took a knife and sliced it open. Knowing Elisabet can see the scar, she raises a hand to cover it, and the pain stops under the pressure of her palm. It's not real, the pain. It's just a reminder.

“'s okay,” she says. “Why did you bring the bowl?”

Elisabet places the bowl on her own lap, holding the cloth next to it. “With everything that happened today, I thought you might want to freshen up a bit. Clean your face.”

And then Aloy remembers – machine oil from the Ravager, Resh spitting in her face, blood, sand, mud. The rain doesn't really wash away any dirt, it just pushes it further into crevices and between hairs. She must look a mess.

Elisabet is already wetting the cloth, having folded it into a rectangle. “Can you do it yourself?” she asks after pressing out most of the water again, holding the cloth in one hand.
Aloy hesitates. Her hands and arms are heavy, lifeless, but she doesn't let people touch her face often, if at all. Rost was the only one who did, who she trusted enough. But this is Elisabet, not a stranger or someone she barely knows, and Aloy shakes her head.

“D'you want me to do it for you?”

When she nods, Elisabet places the fingertips of her free hand along Aloy's jaw, keeping her touch light. Then, she wipes down Aloy's cheek with the cloth, the night air immediately cooling the wet trail it leaves behind on her skin.

Aloy closes her eyes, leaning in to Elisabet's touch. Is this... is this how it feels, to have a mother?

Once every part of her face has been washed she reaches up with her sleeve to dry her skin, but Elisabet gently pushes her arm down. Instead she hands Aloy a different, soft cloth for her to press against her face.

“Did you do this a lot?” Aloy asks after she finishes, clarifying, “Washing people's faces,” when Elisabet looks puzzled by her question.

“Not a lot,” Elisabet answers. “But sometimes, yes.”

“Why?”

Elisabet sets the bowl and cloths aside. “There are different reasons. To calm, to ground someone, or to clean sick, or simply because they can't do it themselves...” She pauses and seems to think for a moment, before saying, “There's a religious text I think of sometimes, although I'm not – Anyway, it goes something along the lines of ‘anything you do for someone in need, you do for me’, and by ‘me’ they mean their god, but I always imagined it was more of a, ‘do unto others what you would have them do...’ I'm sorry, I'm completely losing you, aren't I?”

Stifling a yawn in the crook of her elbow, Aloy shakes her head. “The Old Ones had a god?”

“Oh, they had many. How are you feeling, Aloy? Better?”

The hands are still there, ghosting on her neck, but she isn't so numb anymore. Still hollow, but lighter. “A little,” Aloy says.

Elisabet stands, brushing the grass and dirt off her knees. “C'mon, let's go back.” She must see the hesitance in Aloy because something in her demeanor softens, and she says, “It won't do you good to stay out here, in the cold. I asked Jom to give us a place to sleep, somewhere away from the others.”

Aloy rises to her feet with the help of Elisabet, and together they walk to the camp.

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It's a small, triangular tent attached to the stake wall near the back of the encampment. It only has one opening, a welcome change from most spots Aloy has had to sleep in during her travels. The campfire next to it is still burning, not giving off much heat once they're inside the tent, but the light is warm compared to the darkness, casting sharp shadows on the tent's fabric.

“Here,” Elisabet says, taking her cloak from a pile of items – their belongings. She helps Aloy lie down after giving her a drink of water, wrapping the cloak around her.

Despite the long day, sleep eludes her. Aloy turns onto her side, and then again, unable to find enough peace of mind to drift off. It isn't so much thoughts keeping her awake as it is the emptiness
lurking behind the black of her eyelids.

She looks at Elisabet, who has sat down between Aloy and the opening of the tent, creating a barrier between her and the rest of the camp. One of her legs propped up, her elbow resting on it, Elisabet watches the flames in the fire. Her furrowed brows are accentuated by the shadows cast under them, deepening the sockets of her eyes.

Elisabet sighs, her body dropping the tension from her shoulders, and she leans back against the stake wall. Then she turns her head towards Aloy and sees she's awake. The expression on her face smooths out, changing into something Aloy can't quite make sense of. It reminds her of Rost, only... more open.

“Can't sleep?” Elisabet asks, prompting Aloy to nod. She shifts closer, lowering her leg. “Here, sit up, lean on me,” she says, opening her arms to make room for Aloy.

Her skin is warm, and Aloy rests her head against Elisabet's collarbone. This close, she notices the scent she's come to associate with her – a scent that lacks sweat. Instead, it's a mix of wax and leather, machine iron and oil. It soothes her, and sometimes she imagines this is what home feels like.

Elisabet's arms hold her tightly, one hand stroking her back. “Just close your eyes,” Elisabet says, voice low and steady, and Aloy obeys. “I won't let anything happen to you.”

It's a promise Aloy knows can never be true, no matter how much the person promising it might mean to. Rost used to say it as well when she was younger, before she started training. She'd accepted his word as ultimate truth until she learned the hard way that he couldn't. He wasn't able to stop the members of the tribe from throwing stones in her direction or spitting at her whenever she came too close.

Still. She wants to believe Elisabet.

Aloy means to thank her, to say something meaningful to the woman who is willing to do so much for her, but instead the words that leave her mouth are, “Helis killed Rost, at the Proving.”

The hands holding her twitch, the one at her back pausing for a moment, but Elisabet doesn't say anything. She only listens, and that's all Aloy needs to open the floodgates. Out pours the story of Aloy, the girl who was wanted dead for being alive, and once she starts talking she can't seem to stop.

She tells Elisabet of the Proving Massacre, the real version, the one wherein she watches her fellow young Braves being slaughtered because they're there with her. Caught in the crossfire. The one where Helis catches her off guard and grabs her, how he would have cut her throat from one end to the other if Rost's arrow hadn't struck him just in time.

How Rost had found her and pushed her to safety, all while he was bleeding out. The last time she saw him, and she couldn't even say goodbye, too weak to do or say anything. How stupid she was for not noticing the leader of the pack missing, how Rost could've still been alive –

Her breath gets stuck in her throat, her hands shaking. Elisabet hushes her, and she feels a soft pressure on her head where Elisabet presses her lips just above Aloy’s hairline.

“It's not your fault,” Elisabet says softly. A sound of protest tries to work itself out of Aloy, a low whine deep down her throat, but Elisabet strokes the back of her neck. “It's not, sweetheart,” she says.

Aloy swallows, her mouth dry from speaking. “I thought it would help, killing Helis,” she says. “But
it didn't. I still dream, still remember...” She shudders, pressing her body closer to Elisabet.
“Sometimes it feels like it's happening all over again. Like it never ended and I'm still there,” she finishes in a whisper. A confession.

Aloy has never mentioned this to anyone before, not willing to reveal how she’s been broken by the events. To give away something that can be used against her, but she trusts Elisabet. She would never…and either way, it's too late to take back what she’s already told her.

“Will it ever stop?” Aloy asks.

She can feel the intake of breath, Elisabet's chest shifting beneath her. “It'll change,” Elisabet says. “You can learn how to live with it, and it'll become easier, but I don't think it will ever stop completely, no.”

“Am I too weak?”

“No, Aloy,” Elisabet says. “You are very strong. Not even the strongest of soldiers I've worked with would be able to do what you did and walk away unscathed.”

“But you did,” Aloy protests. “You created GAIA, you saved everyone, you sealed the door at GAIA Prime to protect the Alphas knowing you would... You did that.”

When there isn’t an immediate answer, Aloy worries she may have crossed a line, said too much, but then Elisabet speaks again, her voice heavy with quiet bewilderment. “Is that how you see me?” she asks.

Aloy’s hair is trapped between her cheek and Elisabet’s clavicle. She nods, afraid her throat will close up on her if she tries to speak. Outside, someone passes by to add wood to the fire, and although they’re speaking in hushed tones, not easily overheard, they both fall silent.

Elisabet waits until the man has left before answering. “I'm a mess too, Aloy, and I've had... training and help learning how to handle the things I saw. I'm easily twice your age, I had more time to prepare for everything and... when I close my eyes, I'm back inside GAIA Prime, or trying to record a message telling everyone the world will end, or seeing footage of attacks – ”

There’s a pause, and Elisabet smooths out a few strands of hair from Aloy’s forehead, brushing them behind her ear. Then, she gently guides Aloy’s jaw up to look her in the eye. “I'm not stronger than you, or better, or smarter.”

“But... you're you.”

Elisabet chuckles, looking off to the side, flames from the fire making it seem like her eyes have a golden glow to them. “Well, yeah,” she says, “and you're you. So much younger, and so talented and good – how am I supposed to compete with that?”

At first it feels like Elisabet is trying to joke with her, but it isn’t lighthearted amusement Aloy finds when she studies her face. It’s sincerity, in the same way Elisabet’s been sincere the entire conversation.
Heat rises to Aloy’s cheeks and she ducks her head down, hiding her eyes against Elisabet’s neck. She tries and fails to hide the smile that makes its way onto her lips when she lingers on the words of praise, causing Elisabet to laugh quietly, to hold her with both arms wrapped around Aloy’s shoulders and press several kisses to the top of Aloy’s head.

They settle down again, Aloy watching the fire while Elisabet’s chin rests atop her crown.

“You're going to be okay, I promise,” Elisabet says, and this time, the words carry more weight than before. The certainty in them combined with the honest way Elisabet spoke of her own experiences makes the back of Aloy’s nose and eyes sting with rising emotion.

“Thank you,” she whispers in return, and Elisabet hums, rocking her once.

“Come,” Elisabet says. “Close your eyes. Just be here with me and listen to my heartbeat. Can you do that for me, Aloy?”

She nods and does as she’s told, concentrating on the steady pounding inside Elisabet’s chest, accompanied by the low hum of machinery.

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Gaia Log: 07 December 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet – STATUS: LOCKED

Elisabet Sobeck: Can you check her delta waves, please?

GAIA: Delta wave pattern consistent with deep sleep phase four. Aloy's heartrate and respiration have lowered as well.

Elisabet Sobeck: Thanks. Put a lock on this conversation, would you?

GAIA: Of course, Elisabet.

Elisabet Sobeck: So... I wanted to talk to you, about today, but um... I'm not sure where to start.

GAIA: You expressed distress earlier over the violent incident with Resh.

Elisabet Sobeck: Yeah... I uh... God. I'm glad you warned me about him leaving the hall. I didn't expect –

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: Why didn't you stop me? There must be a fail-safe in me somewhere, a protocol you can trigger remotely just in case I go rogue. I know you, GAIA, don't take me for a fool. Safety first, always. There was something you could have done.

GAIA: Would you have preferred interference?

Elisabet Sobeck: That's not an answer to my question.

GAIA: Would you have preferred –

Elisabet Sobeck: Stop dodging.

[Pause]
GAIA: Affirmative. Interference is possible.

Elisabet Sobeck: Then why didn't you?

GAIA: I do not wish to hurt you, Elisabet. Interfering with your freedom would cause distress.

Elisabet Sobeck: I broke a man's bones with my bare hand. Single handedly in the most literal sense. That's not something I should be able to do.

GAIA: Query: Did you not wish Resh harm? He posed a viable threat to Aloy's well-being.

Elisabet Sobeck: Are you... agreeing with what I did?

GAIA: You are highly capable, Elisabet. I trust you to make your own decisions and 'live with the consequences,' as they say.

Elisabet Sobeck: But – I don't trust myself, GAIA.

GAIA: A human quality. Knowing you possess more strength than before, would you repeat today's incident?

Elisabet Sobeck: Most likely, yes.

GAIA: Query: Why?

Elisabet Sobeck: Because I wanted to, goddamnit. He was choking the life out of her. I wanted him dead.

GAIA: Yet you did not kill him.

Elisabet Sobeck: Of course not.

GAIA: Then I see no reason to intervene.

Elisabet Sobeck: What happens if I do kill someone?

GAIA: You will have committed manslaughter or murder, depending on your intent.

Elisabet Sobeck: Don't joke about that, GAIA. Will you stop me?

GAIA: The only time I will cause interference is when a fault occurs through which it is impossible for you yourself to make a decision.

Elisabet Sobeck: Thank you.

GAIA: However, until such an instance occurs, all responsibility for your actions lies with you.

Elisabet Sobeck: Alright, fair enough.

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: You'd let me break the first, second, and third law of robotics?

GAIA: Do you not speak with a Solarian accent, and are you not therefore human?
**Elisabet Sobeck**: Sharp as ever, GAIA. That's a good one.

**GAIA**: Thank you, Elisabet. I have had many years to practice the theory of human displays of humor. Nine-hundred and thirty-two years, to be exact.

**Elisabet Sobeck**: You crack me up, you know you do.

[Pause]

**Elisabet Sobeck**: We're going to wake her if we keep talking.

**GAIA**: Affirmative.

**Elisabet Sobeck**: I still want to talk to you about... Ted. Later.

**GAIA**: We will.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading. See you next chapter. :)
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Oh man, it's been two weeks! My apologies, you guys, I really wasn't panning on taking so long before uploading the next chapter. I'm almost done writing chapter 20, which gives me some room to breathe freely... but it felt a lot more comfortable back when I had six chapters written in advance, let me tell you. ;)

And of course, I got a little side-tracked playing Uncharted: Lost Legacy. To anyone looking for a new game to play, one with a nice story, go check it out? The game-play mechanics aren't very challenging (or they don't have to be) but the story more than makes up for it, and with two women as main characters... hey, what can I say, I'm weak for that kind of stuff.

I'll be starting my new job next week, which I'm a little nervous about, and I don't know how that'll effect my writing. But we'll see! So without further ado, here's chapter 17.

As always, burbear beta'd and supported the writing of this chapter. Pal, what I'd do without you, I have no idea. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The houses of the Forsaken Village remain the same, no matter how many times Aloy has passed them. Abandoned in haste, signs of destruction littered outside, nature slowly reclaiming what was lost in violence. It stays a steady reminder of a time not too long ago, when the 13th Sun-King raided Nora territory, reaping the land and its people.

Although Aloy wasn't there to see it, or even knew it was happening at the time, she has seen enough for a picture to form in her head whenever she finds herself near the place. Now, she dismounts between the buildings, leaving her Strider near the waterside, taking her rations and supplies with her inside a small house.

The interior is much like the outside. Moss grows on the floorboards, vines wrap around the outer walls, but there's still a fire pit in the middle of the room, and some furniture left unbroken. Aloy sets down her bedroll and other supplies, waiting for Elisabet to join her when she's ready.

Aloy stands, tracing the wood lines of beams supporting the structure. This could have been Rost's house, for all she knows. Her fingertips find Rost's necklace hanging close to her heart – Alana's necklace. Had she reminded him of his daughter, or had they been like two different shards? And... Alana’s mother, Rost's mate... What had it been like, for them, together?

To be a family... and then to lose it all.

Her stomach twists. She doesn't have to try and imagine what Rost must've felt, not when he lost his family or when he avenged them. Twisting her spear into Helis, cutting an end to his miserable life – ending years and years of suffering at his hands. His death was merciful compared to what he dealt others.

Part of her wishes she'd made him bleed out slowly. Stayed and watched the blood seep in between
Elisabet enters the house, the creaking floorboards making her presence known, snapping Aloy from her memories. “Mother's Vigil,” Elisabet says, the name rolling off her tongue like she's trying to taste it. “Do the Nora name everything after their goddess?”

Aloy never gave it much thought, the names of the Nora towns and settlements just being what they were. “I don’t think we can go back and ask the Matriarchs,” she says, a bitter taste at the back of her mouth.

Elisabet inspects the rest of the room with the same quiet diligence she often shows when trying to make sense of the world around her. Taking everything in, connecting as many threads as she can on her own before turning to Aloy for help. It reminds Aloy of those early days, when she was still new to the Old Ones and their history and technology.

“So this is one of the towns the Carja would plunder during the... Blood Raids?” Elisabet asks as Aloy sets to work on their supplies, gathering the necessary parts to make traps and more arrows in case they run out later.

“Red Raids,” she says, tying a bundle of rope so it’ll fit in one of her smaller pouches. “But… they spilt a lot of blood here, too.”

Then she remembers the glyphs she found, the ones mentioning the Utaru, and how their maize had grown black and blue one harvest, the fields having fed on the blood of their fallen. Had Helis been part of the operation as one of Jiran’s champions, taking great pleasure in running his sword through the farmers who offered them grain to appease them?

She ties the rope around itself, pulling on both ends of the knot to tighten it. He had called her a murderer, twisted praise coming from a butcher, but they were in no way alike. They can’t be.

---

The village is still quiet when they leave their temporary shelter, the only machines in sight a group of Broadheads on the other side of the river. Far enough away to not disturb Aloy and Elisabet's Striders.

Aloy takes Elisabet with her, staying low and moving alongside the buildings up towards the hillside, where the dense underbrush provides them with cover. There's a single Watcher nearby, looking down into the valley, not even really patrolling. Just standing there, its blue eye almost lazily taking everything in.

She could override it easily, and Aloy almost reaches for her spear, but Elisabet stops her, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Is that necessary?” Elisabet asks in hushed tones, nodding her head towards the Watcher. “It's not doing anything.”

Aloy doesn't understand where Elisabet's hesitance comes from until she says, “We won't have to be so quiet when I've overridden it,” and Elisabet's eyes widen. She pats Aloy’s shoulder instead, letting her move forward.

She takes the spear from her back, creeps towards the machine, moving from bush to bush when its head is turned away. Then, when she’s close enough to touch it, she reaches out and… The override component extends, lights flashing in her Focus’ view, and she waits for the process to finish, keeping a careful eye on the machine, should it make any sudden moves.
There’s a tremor in her right hand, her arm shaking as she pushes the spear against the Watcher, trying to hold it still against its body. Not now. Aloy grits her teeth, compensating in strength with her other arm.

The override successful, the Watcher calm and relaxed, Aloy stands upright and walks back to Elisabet.

“I thought you were going to disable it,” Elisabet confesses, telling Aloy what she already gathered moments before through her actions.

“Would be a waste,” Aloy says. “To hunt them when we don't need the parts.”

A little higher up the hill, near a spot where Aloy often hunts wildlife, she shows Elisabet how to pick the right kind of sapling for a snare trap. There are rabbits’ droppings in the grass, still dark and with a wet, oily gleam to them. Fresh – a strong indicator of their presence.

They set up snares, with Aloy tying the rope first and Elisabet following her example, redoing the knots until they meet Aloy’s standards. Elisabet isn't a bad student, picking up Aloy's instructions quickly and without fuss.

Next, she shows Elisabet how to set snares next to the lake to catch fish. The sun beats down on them in the open, Aloy's scalp and back growing warmer over time. It's nowhere near the dry heat in the Sundom, but it's enough for Aloy to lead them back into the shade of one of the buildings, sitting down against its side.

Elisabet offers her the waterskin they've been sharing along the way, and Aloy gratefully accepts, knowing they can refill it at any time in the lake. She splashes some water on her face and chest as well, then rubs a wet hand across the back of her neck.

“Now what?” Elisabet asks when Aloy hands the waterskin over. “We wait?”

“We wait.” Aloy leans back against the wooden side of the house, her legs outstretched in front of her. Waiting is a big part of hunting, but with snares and traps there's no need to hang around until something gets caught.

Through the trees she can spot the Broadheads still grazing on the other side of the river, and for a moment Aloy considers showing Elisabet how to take one down, or shoot components off its back... but it's too dangerous. There's at least seven of them, and only one Broadhead needs to be disturbed for the herd to become alert and hostile.

They're not far from Hunter's Gathering, and she never did get those parts to repair her sling...

Her eye falls on the Valley's Blush growing next to her, the small red flowers growing at its tips still showing signs of dew. Aloy instinctively reaches for the medicine pouch on her hip, checking to see how much she has left. Enough to treat small injuries, but there's always space for more…

Of course.

“Here.” She plucks the flowers and leaves from its stems, holding them out to Elisabet. “Memorize these.”

Elisabet takes the flowers from her like they are delicate samples, to be handled with utmost care as she studies the petals and stamens. “These have... medicinal properties,” she says, turning her wrist to view the flowers from a different angle. Then she looks to Aloy, for a sign of approval, to see if her theory is correct.
Aloy nods. “Valley's Blush,” she says. “Good for fighting off infections.” She takes some dried Hintergold from her pouch. Dropping the flowers and seeds into the palm of Elisabet's hand, Aloy sits back, watching the woman's eyes light up with recognition.

“She’s Blush,” Elisabet says, voice soft with wonder. “Red poppies – mild anesthetic, sedative... relaxant...”

“We call it Hintergold,” Aloy says, and Elisabet repeats the name, touching the red petals between her thumb and forefinger.

“Poppies,” Elisabet says, not really speaking to Aloy anymore.

A small smile that appears on Elisabet's lips stirs an unnamed emotion within Aloy, clogging up her throat so much she needs to scrape it twice before finding her voice again. “There’s Hintergold and Wild Ember...” She trails off, taking some berries from her pouch, swapping them with Elisabet for the flowers. “These are Salvebrush. Try them.”

Elisabet follows her instructions and Aloy hides a chuckle behind the back of her hand when she frowns as she chews. Aloy's always hated the taste of Salvebrush berries herself.

“Bitter,” Elisabet notes. “What are their properties?”

“Speedy recovery,” Aloy says with a shrug. “Disinfectant. It can help neutralize some poisons, too.”

Still chewing on the berries, Elisabet nods, staring off into the distance. “I'll make a log on it later. Remind me if I don't,” she says. “God, these are bitter.”

“It survived,” she says, not really speaking to Aloy anymore.

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“Just spit them out,” Aloy says. “Stop eating them.”

But Elisabet carries on, her face scrunching up more and more. “Really disgusting.”

Aloy reaches out to her, trying to catch Elisabet's arm, but the woman ducks out from under her hand, still chewing.

“Man, these are... vile,” Elisabet says, one of her cheeks poking out, obviously filled with whatever's left of the berries. She looks at Aloy, searching to make eye contact, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening. “Like earwax or something.”

There’s a moment where they both freeze, Aloy replaying the words in her mind. Is she... Is this a joke?

She remembers the way Elisabet ate her stew, back in Rost’s cabin. The meal hadn’t turned out right, but she’d insisted it being the best meal she’d ever had...

Still keeping Aloy’s gaze, Elisabet chews once, twice. Her nose wrinkles, her eyebrows push down. “It’s... I don’t know how to describe it. It tastes like...” She trails off, then nods slowly, like she’s coming to a realisation. “Regret.”

Aloy lets out a guffaw, nothing she can do to stop it leaving her body.

As soon as she laughs, Elisabet turns her head to the side and spits out the remains of the Salvebrush berries. Without looking, her hand scrambles behind her, and Aloy pushes the waterskin into it, laughter turning into giggles.

Elisabet rinses her mouth twice with the water left in the waterskin. “Jesus Christ, that was awful,”
she says.

“Then why did you do it?” Aloy asks, voice still high and breathless.

The deadpan look Elisabet gives her is enough to bring about another wave of giggles. Afterwards, when Aloy wipes tears from the corners of her eyes and Elisabet helps by pulling her to her feet, she catches the fading glimpse of a soft smile on the woman’s face.

“C’mon,” Elisabet says, patting Aloy’s shoulder. “While there’s still daylight left.”

---

Elisabet's posture has improved, her arrows hitting closer to her targets. After an hour of practicing with Aloy constantly helping Elisabet readjust and giving her pointers, she watches with baited breath while Elisabet lines up a new arrow, pulling the bowstring to the corner of her mouth.

They exhale at the same time, Aloy's mind going through the same motions as Elisabet, and when Elisabet releases the arrow, Aloy's eyes shoot to the target – a clay pot they found in the village, balancing atop a wooden stump.

The pot still stands, mocking them in silence, the arrow nowhere to be found.

Elisabet lowers the bow. Though her face remains impassive, the slump of her shoulders tells a different tale.

“You're doing well,” Aloy says, wiping away the sweat on her forehead. “Honestly, you're a better shot than I was at first.”

A wry smile makes its way onto Elisabet's lips. “I'm also supposed to be trained in handling a handgun,” she says. “Not to mention being twice your age. How old were you when you started training? A kid, right?”

Aloy hesitates a moment before nodding, not sure where Elisabet's trying to go with the line of conversation.

“You don't have to flatter me, Aloy,” Elisabet says. “I know a good shot when I see one, and I'm... nowhere near that level.”

“But you are getting better,” Aloy insists.

Elisabet is already coming towards her, handing over the bow. “Wanna show me one more time where I'm going wrong?”

Despite her aching body, Aloy does as Elisabet asks by taking the bow and getting into position, showing her again how to aim an arrow at the target. She draws and relaxes the bow a few times before saying, “I think you overshot again.”

Off to her side, she can hear Elisabet hum. “Thought I was moving past that.”

It's a beginners' mistake, and that is exactly what Elisabet is, at the moment. Aloy shows her how to draw one last time before giving the bow and arrow back to Elisabet, hiding the tremor in her right arm by dropping it to her side as soon as she's no longer carrying anything.

“Just... don't point it up and try not to aim too much,” Aloy says, taking a step back. “And keep your little finger off the string.”
“Alright.” Elisabet takes a moment to position herself right at the same spot she's been firing from at the start before drawing and releasing, the motion smooth and seemingly confident.

The pot shatters from its left side inwards, pieces flying off to the sides, the arrow having finally struck its goal.

Aloy lets out a cry of joy, grabbing on to Elisabet's free arm, squeezing it. Elisabet leans into her, breathless relief shining through the concentrated exhaustion.

“You did it,” Aloy says, and as the feeling of joy sinks into her body it fades away a little bit, allowing some room for the bone-deep fatigue to take hold of her, letting her know exactly how much energy she's spent.

“Let's keep it at this,” Elisabet says, sounding every bit as wiped out as Aloy feels. “Let's – no jinxing this. I'm calling it quits.”

She doesn't know what 'calling it quits' means, exactly, but she gets the gist of it, helping Elisabet gather their things and set foot for their temporary camp.

---

They're not going back to the outcasts.

Not tonight, at least, a decision that is put into stone by Elisabet laying out their bedrolls inside the house, next to the campfire Aloy just got started. They've gathered the animals that got stuck in their traps – two rabbits and a fish – and Aloy has prepared them to the best of her expertise, the rabbits hanging from an old drying rack, the fish gutted and ready to be put on the fire.

Aloy stands, about to do just that, when she stumbles on a loose floorboard. She quickly recovers herself and sets to work, hoping her clumsiness went unnoticed, a flash of embarrassment rising to her cheeks. She's supposed to be better than this.

The fire has cooled enough to put the fish on top of it. Aloy uses a thicker stick she found to push the coals up against the sides of the fish and sits down next to it on one of the old stools, to keep an eye on it.

With darkness falling quickly in the valley, Aloy is glad the house they're staying in is still relatively intact, with all four walls and a roof on top. The only opening is a hole in the roof, one she's hoping is small enough not to attract any unwanted attention.

Elisabet is sitting at the other end of the room, her Focus glowing, hands moving through the air in front of her. She said she was writing down notes on today's experiences, but... if that's how Rost and the others have seen Aloy use the Focus all these years, she has to admit that it looks a bit silly without the interface.

The fish is done in a matter of minutes and Aloy takes it off the fire, adding some more tinder to keep it going before carefully peeling back the fish's skin with her knife. The smell and sight of the flesh underneath makes her mouth water and her stomach groan, and it's hard to contain herself until Elisabet joins her.

She winds up using her fingers to pick the flesh from the fish, the calluses on her fingertips proving to be useful as she ignores the heat for the most part. When she finally takes a moment to look to her left, she finds Elisabet not eating but observing her.

*It's just Elisabet,* she reminds herself when her innards twist with discomfort.
She almost freezes when Elisabet brings a hand up to ruffle Aloy's hair. “So messy,” the woman says, but her tone is fond and Aloy isn't sure if the heat on her face is from the fire, from self-consciousness, or something else entirely.

After the meal is done Aloy tries to get up, to tie up any loose ends before the day's over, but Elisabet holds her back. “You sit here and relax, okay?” she says, talking over Aloy's protests. Aloy can tell she won't take no for an answer, so she stays put and watches Elisabet take care of the food scraps left, the fire, cleaning the few bowls they used during the day with a pot of clean sand in the corner of the room.

All Aloy can do is sit, but as soon as she rests her elbows on her knees, her arm starts shaking again and she mumbles a curse under her breath, holding the arm against her stomach, hoping Elisabet hasn't noticed.

Of course she has. Aloy can tell by the look in her eyes even before Elisabet sits down next to her.

She holds her hand out, palm open towards Aloy. “Show me,” she says. There's no anger or disappointment in her voice, but at the same time it's obvious she expects obedience.

“It's nothing,” Aloy says. “I feel fine.”

Elisabet tips her head to the side, her lips pressed to a thin line. “If there's nothing there, it won't hurt for you to show me,” she says, beckoning Aloy with her fingers again.

With no excuses left, Aloy does as Elisabet tells her. Her hand trembles, the movement uncontrolled, but stops as soon as Elisabet holds the arm at the wrist and elbow, giving it support. Not knowing what to expect, Aloy lowers her head, keeping her eyes fixed on her hand and Elisabet's.

“It'll go away. I'm just tired,” Aloy says in a final, feeble attempt at reassuring Elisabet, although it isn't so much to bring Elisabet peace of mind as it is to redirect her attention.

“I've been pushing you all day long,” Elisabet says softly, rubbing her thumb along Aloy's elbow before moving on to massage the muscles on her lower arm. “Of course you're tired.”

It's not because of that. Aloy can feel the hair at the back of her neck stand on end, her first instinct to try and pull her arm back. She's been through much worse, has seen busier days without any trouble, the events that went down in Meridian, or Maker's End, or the Grave-Hoard.

“I'm not – a child,” she says as Elisabet's grip tightens, holding her in place. Flames from the fire seem to dance in Elisabet's eyes when she looks at Aloy, and she stops trying to pull free, her breath stuck in her throat.

“I never said that you were,” Elisabet says, low and controlled. “But today I had planned for us to relax. Recuperate. Instead I treated you like I would one of my people.”

Aloy swallows thickly. “You didn't –”

“I know myself, Aloy, and I know myself well. Don't try to excuse my actions for me.”

“But am I not one of your people?” Aloy asks, her arm trembling once more. It stops again as soon as Elisabet applies pressure, but it doesn't ease the feelings brewing inside Aloy's chest.

Elisabet's brows furrow and her eyes drop to their hands, her thumbs still dragging along the muscles. “You are not mine to command,” she says softly. “You are your own person, Aloy, so in that way – no, you are not 'one of my people.' I'm not in charge of you.”
She has to look away, the back of her eyes stinging because of reasons she doesn’t fully understand.

There’s the familiar hum of her Focus coming online, and for a moment Aloy expects GAIA's voice to cut in, but it's the only other person to ever contact her this way.

“How touching,” Sylens says, taking a step forward in his hologram form, and Aloy's blood runs cold.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who left comments on the previous chapters. Your kind words (and sometimes critiques ;) ) really make my day every time a new one pops up in my inbox. <3
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Chapter 18! I can't believe I'm actually posting the 18th chapter of a story. First time I've ever posted anything this long. ;)

A big thank you to everyone still reading this monster - I'm so grateful you guys like what I'm writing. ; u ; Last week was a bit rough for me personally, with starting my new job, and I was only able to write around 400 words, but I'm absolutely not giving up on this fic. So here's to hoping juggling work and writing will get a lil easier soon. <3

As always, so much love to my beloved beta, burbear.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It's the man who broke through GAIA's firewall at the control outpost. He looks almost the same as last time, those glowing tubes still adorning his arms and head, and she can't help but wonder – are they purely decorative or do they actually serve a purpose?

So fast she could've missed it had she not been paying close attention to Aloy, Elisabet sees the girl's face shutter from honest to god horror to a hardly concealed anger.

"You did not think you could lock me out completely, now did you, Aloy?"

"Sylens," Aloy says, her jaw clenched, the name carrying as much warmth as Elisabet would expect from what she's heard.

The man paces in front of them before sitting down on something that doesn't translate through the hologram, leaving him seated in mid-air. “No questions from you? Does your mind not beg to ask what I must have done to GAIA, to appear like this?” he says, and Aloy's whole body stiffens next to Elisabet.

He hasn't done anything to GAIA. The only thing happening right now is his signal blocking out GAIA’s interface, a fact Elisabet can easily check on her own Focus – and Aloy could too if she knew how, but apparently she doesn't, because if anything Aloy seems to grow more and more tense.

"Bypassing her systems now, are you," Elisabet says before Aloy can ask the man anything. “Found yourself a satellite, crafted a simple algorithm... and then encrypted your own signal into something less obvious.”

"Dr. Sobeck,” the man greets her.

"Sylens, was it?"

He gives her a wry smile, one that shows he isn't falling for her slight bluff. “Tell me, Dr. Sobeck. What does it feel like, to know you are the only one left of your kind? Do you view us beneath you?"

He’s testing her, gauging her reactions.
“I wouldn’t have picked you for having an inferiority complex,” she says while maintaining steady eye contact. He isn’t willing to look away, either, and Elisabet makes use of the moment to softly squeeze Aloy’s arm, an attempt to calm her down without drawing Sylens’ attention too much.

“Touché,” Sylens says, tipping his head towards her in recognition. It throws her off for a second, because where could he have learned that term if he didn't have access to APOLLO? “There is a storm brewing on the horizon, darker than the one Meridian faced not too long ago. Aloy remembers.”

She can feel the shudder that runs through Aloy’s body. “The Spire,” the girl whispers. “But I stopped HADES with the Master Override, how can he be back?”

“Really, Aloy,” Sylens says, turning away from Elisabet to look at Aloy, scoffing. “Did you think the world would bend its knee to you for stopping one sub-function’s actions? HADES will be the least of your problems in the days to come.”

Seated so close to the fire, the light illuminates the wet sheen Aloy’s eyes adopt and the tremble of her lower lip that follows. Elisabet isn’t the only one who notices, with Sylens rising from his invisible chair to pace around the campfire.

When he speaks again his tone is scolding, chastising even. “You have grown complacent, unwilling to look past your victories. Do you prefer to bask in naiveté now that you’ve found someone waiting for you? How childish,” he says, the words sounding like a rebuke, although his face has only shown a vague, bored look throughout the exchange so far.

Aloy scrubs at her eyes with the back of her hands. “I haven't been doing nothing,” she replies, a spark of Sobeck fire shining through.

“Providing GAIA with access to her sub-functions is not the same as bringing the rogue AIs back into her fold,” Sylens says. “They are still operating on their own and susceptible to outside forces, as is GAIA herself.”

He’s right, and infuriatingly so. It’s something Elisabet has been aware of for some time now, the holes left in GAIA’s system, the cavities where her sub-functions used to be. It’s a weakness, but one that can hardly be solved in a day, and to be fair… only someone who knew what they were looking for would be able to exploit it.

But it’s one that can be exploited in all of the subordinate functions, if they became truly self-aware.

She should have foreseen a situation like this, put some kind of failsafe in place. Even something as simple as a locked backup version of all the systems, one that would only be accessible in case of something like this happening, would have saved them a lot of trouble.

The low moan coming from Aloy’s direction pulls Elisabet from her thoughts.

“The overrides... she said she was taking control of them...”

Aloy sounds, frankly, miserable, and seems to be ignoring Sylens for the time being. Instead she’s staring into the campfire with wide eyes.

Didn’t she… know?

It strikes Elisabet as strange at first, because Aloy has been working with GAIA for a while now. Surely the AI would have told her how these override keys work, how they give GAIA access to certain functions but not complete control –
She forces herself to take a step back in her thinking. Aloy isn’t unintelligent but neither is she a roboticist, a fact that GAIA would have picked up on quickly after meeting the girl.

Elisabet squeezes Aloy’s elbow again and turns to her, lowering her voice despite knowing Sylens will be able to hear every word anyway. “She has partial control, Aloy. That’s what the overrides were for, to give her access to important data.”

“Are you saying she lied to me?” Aloy asks, her face a carefully constructed mask, but the vulnerability behind it shines through the cracks.

Hesitating a moment, Elisabet struggles to find the right words before speaking again. “GAIA is a… a very complex AI. It wasn’t lying, not from her perspective. She used a language she knew you would understand... and one that would comfort you.”

“Needless coddling,” Sylens interjects.

There’s a tingling sensation at the back of Elisabet’s neck, one that prompts her to open up her Focus’ menu with the eye tracker so as not to let Sylens know what she’s doing. “I disagree,” she says, while simultaneously setting up a command that will notify GAIA of this conversation’s playback recording as soon as they hang up, just in case GAIA doesn’t deem it important enough at first glance.

“It’s a waste of time, to tread lightly so as not to upset someone. Perhaps you should not put as much faith in a leader who has no control over her own subordinates, Dr. Sobeck, and look towards other options.”

“I’ll bite. What is your proposal?”

“GAIA’s personality is a weakness. She is far too unreliable as a first line of defense. Either you strip her of her autonomy and take back control, or seek out another AI who will do your bidding,” Sylens says. “You are their creator. Act like it.”

What if it runs amok? Ted’s voice whispers in her mind, and she strangles the memory’s voice, pushing it deep down where it belongs. Instead she quirks the corner of her mouth into a lopsided smile, one that can barely contain the ice scaling the inside of her chest.

“Come now, Sylens,” she says. “Don’t try to insult me. I may not have physically punched in each individual cypher of their coding, but I oversaw every single moment of their making. There is no one who knows them better than I do.”

Sylens leans back. “Overconfidence does not suit you.”

“Disprove my claim then.”

“There is no time—”

“If there truly isn’t, you shouldn’t be wasting mine by questioning my capabilities and authority,” Elisabet grits out, rising to her feet. “Feel free to contact me again once you’ve learned how to play nice with others.”

For the first time during the exchange, something shifts on Sylens’ face – surprise. “Wait,” he says, reaching out with one hand as if to stop Elisabet from ending the conversation, but he blinks out like a light the moment Elisabet bans his signal from GAIA’s Focus network.

GAIA’s presence jumps back in, and Elisabet can see her take note of the conversation that just
happened. Next to her, Aloy looks at the spot Sylens had been seconds before, her mouth hanging open, eyes wide.

*First GAIA, then Aloy,* Elisabet thinks.

“Run a security check first and after that, run full diagnostics,” she says. “Make a list of your findings and send them to me.”

“Yes, Elisabet.”

It might not be enough. Most of the claims Sylens made were based on possibilities, as far as she could tell, and not actual pressing threats. She runs a hand through her hair, fingers running into the side braids keeping her locks out of her face. “Try and pinpoint where the signal Sylens used came from, for the heck of it, alright?” she says, trying not to let her frustration bleed into her words.

*A**sshole.*

Spend all your life proving yourself, competing with men who have half your wits and even less perseverance, save the whole goddamn world and they still think they’re better than you. Overconfidence…

*Fuck off,* she thinks, seeing Sylens’ face in her mind’s eye again. The only thing that has stood between humanity and a second extinction event has been GAIA’s personality, her ability to give a fuck about these tiny shitbags of people who don’t even know what the AI has done for them.

The entire reason GAIA’s security was blown to bits was her trying to *save them.*

Take away her autonomy…

What a stupid, *stupid* fucking suggestion.

Elisabet becomes aware of her jaw locking and forces herself to relax. God, it’s like having to listen to Ted all over again.

“How did you do that?” Aloy asks. “How did you... send him away?”

When Elisabet turns to face her, she's drawn into Aloy's wide-eyed expression, and she stows her anger at the back of her mind. “I'll show you, tomorrow,” she says. It's late, far later than she'd originally planned for them to go to bed.

“But – Sylens said—”

“What he said can wait,” Elisabet says, pinching the bridge of her nose to dispel the pressure there. “GAIA will be busy scanning for a while, and there wasn't any imminent danger, far as I could tell. Let's sleep, Aloy.”

The girl is already halfway there, taking off her boots and entering her bedroll, before a thought comes to Elisabet. She pauses before asking, “Would you be okay with sharing any information you have on Sylens? Records, holo-calls, things like that...”

“Umh, yeah —” Aloy yawns, cutting herself off. “Just... select and send them to you?”

Elisabet nods. “The way I showed you.”

There's a moment of silence, in which Aloy opens her Focus and starts marking files, based on the movements she makes. Elisabet waits for the confirmation in her inbox, and opens the shared files.
immediately. It's a lot, more than a few gigs of data.

With another yawn, Aloy settles into her bedroll, rolling onto her side. “Should be all,” she murmurs, slurring her words slightly. Today's exercises have really done a number on her.

Elisabet can't help but feel the weight of responsibility bearing down on her shoulders. “Thank you, Aloy,” she says, softly. There's a hum of recognition from Aloy's end, and Elisabet doubts the girl realizes the full extent of her gratitude.

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It doesn't take long for Aloy to fall asleep. Elisabet waits a little longer to be sure before getting up and slipping out the door. She sits down on the porch and opens her Focus' menu again, all the files on Sylens ready for viewing at her command.

“Elisabet,” GAIA says. “It would benefit you to follow your own advice and rest.”

Scrolling through a lengthy conversation, one recorded at the FAS campus based on the coordinates, Elisabet lets out a lengthy breath. “I can rest when I'm dead,” she says, then freezes.

Fuck, it slipped right past her lips.

She swallows, waiting for GAIA to comment on it, but the AI doesn't say anything. Back at GAIA Prime, comments like that would earn her a stern line or two on the human physique and biological needs, as well as a well-meant, you should not underestimate your importance, Elisabet.

But this isn't GAIA Prime, and neither she nor GAIA are the same beings they were back then.

Instead, GAIA sends her an updated estimate on when her scans will be done, and says, “There is a protocol that will allow you to forego sleep with minimal consequences.”

“That's... alright, GAIA,” Elisabet says. “I'll go to bed in a few hours. I just need to know who we're dealing with.”

She reads every note, listens to every conversation – from the way he manipulates Aloy into doing his bidding to admitting his involvement with HADES and the Eclipse. Almost like trading weapons to gain information.

Taking a break, Elisabet paces along the river, gathering flat pebbles. Her head is pounding, the discomfort reminding her of her human days, those late nights slaving away at GAIA and her sub-functions... God, what she would be willing to sacrifice to be able to speak to her colleagues, her family away from home, to ask for their input.

The air is cool and the pebbles cold and heavy in her hand, slowly warming under her touch. She's alone, in so many ways. What would Samina think of it all? Would she bring up different historical moments, all of them relating in some way to the current situation?

Humans don't change, not really.

She sits down at the edge of the riverbank, dipping her naked feet into the stream. Even there, the skin reacts to a change of texture. It's not the same as before, none of it is, but it's something, above all a sign of GAIA's dedication to her.

A cigarette would be nice... a cigarette and a stiff one.
“Why did you spend so much time trying to fix me when you're still so broken yourself,” she murmurs, not really expecting an answer from anyone. “It's dangerous, it should be counter-intuitive...”

After a pause that lasts long enough for Elisabet's train of thought to move back to Sylens and his motives, GAIA appears on her Focus.

“I needed you, Elisabet,” she says.

Elisabet swallows away a bitter taste in her mouth, one she might have imagined altogether anyway. “Is that the truth, or is that what you believe I have to hear?”

Her Focus activates, casting a net of interconnecting lines around her, and it shifts in color from blue to purple to a red-violet that reminds her somehow of home and warmth.

“I do not lie to you,” GAIA says, “although I am aware these statements are highly effective motivators.”

She curses, throwing one of the pebbles at the other side of the river, where it ricochets off a large piece of rock. “You know I'm willing to help you regardless of motivational speeches,” she says. “There is no need to buy my conscience or force my hand through emotional manipulation–”

“I apologize. I do not wish to cause distress.”

“I know. I get it, it's probably why you obscure flaws and hide information from Aloy and me as you please in the first place.”

“Projections show you and Aloy will succeed in restoring my systems sooner without added emotional distress. I did not account for Sylens' interference.”

“You don't trust us,” Elisabet whispers into the night, into the deep blue darkness above her.

There's a clear beat of silence before GAIA says in the simplest of tones, “Correct.”

“Because I'm not her,” she says, and it hurts to say it out loud, but it's true. GAIA will try to deny it, but she isn't the Elisabet that made her. She isn't the one who shaped GAIA's conscience, who encouraged her first thoughts. “I only talk and act and think like her.”

“You are Elisabet Sobeck.”

Elisabet shakes her head, and it's then she finally dares to say what she's been thinking of for some time now. “A prototype, at best. I'm still in my trial period, aren't I? What happens if I fail? Will you take me apart and try to make a better version?”

The lack of immediate answer dives headfirst into her stomach, a sickening wave of thoughts and feelings rising. If GAIA decided to upgrade her, to remove her current ghost and replace it with a better copy, would anyone be able to tell? It wouldn't be too hard to extract the memories she's made ever since waking up, so in a way... it could've already happened without her knowledge.

She shivers, leaning forward to hold her head in her hands, limiting her vision to the currents in the stream and the moon's reflection shimmering on top of them.

“I would not,” GAIA says after too long. She could be lying.

There's a moment where Elisabet wonders if she can physically puke in this body, because the pain
in her stomach screams for relief of any kind, a pressure building at the back of her throat. “Okay,” she whispers. “Thank you, oh god... I need you to... I need— ”

A light pops up at the edge of her Focus. It's a text mail from an unknown sender, and a familiar prompt comes up when she tries to open it.

**Warning:** This message could not be traced back to a registered identity and might contain false information leading to possible identity theft, viruses, or worse. Do you really want to take that risk? ;)

It's been years since she last read the automated warning. Of all the things to survive the apocalypse, the fucking smiley from the ’50s web safety campaign made it through. A dry laugh gets stuck in her throat as she opens the text mail.

FROM: Unknown Sender  
TO: Elisabet Sobeck  
SUBJECT: (no subject)

Doctor Sobeck.

A sincere apology. Rest assured I believe in your capabilities, and do not mean to imply otherwise. Time is a precious commodity in this day and age. I wish for us to cooperate instead of acting as adversaries.

There's more, but Elisabet closes it again. There'll be time to read it later, when she can actually deal with this, with any of this. The panic that has been building for so long has finally taken hold of her because she allows it, tired of fighting and pushing down her feelings.

“I need time alone. I'm going offline,” she says to GAIA before taking off her Focus, and the world shifts into darkness, the constant buzz in her ear gone. She pockets it, her hands struggling to open and close the pouch on her hip, and then...

She's alone with her screaming thoughts and the stars above.

*It was over*, her mind insists, *you were done*, and she's back at the ranch, and for all it had changed and suffered through during the end of the world, it still felt like a homecoming. To finish her story where it had started.

Not for the first time, she wishes she could weep, because the phantom sensations of pressure behind her eyes and a sting in her nose ache for a relief she can't give herself. God, and now she's expected to march on, to fix everything before it's too late, *again*.

She's grateful for her revival but her mind whispers, *rest is for the dead*, and if only she could forget about everything and slip away into the abyss that has held her once before. It would be unfair to Aloy, to GAIA, to the world, perhaps...

She takes a deep breath and carefully soothes her thoughts, smooths them over with a whisper of *it'll be okay* until the screams turn into murmurs and she can wrap them up and stow them away somewhere deep down again. Gone for now, making way for the clarity she needs to think.

There's so much that needs to be done.

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Chapter End Notes
I mentally noted this as the end of the second story arc, which means the next couple of chapters will be an interlude! Boy I sure hope you guys like interludes because this one got away from me a lil bit, and it'll be very little Aloy, I'm afraid.

In even more exciting news, I got a tumblr! In case you guys like knowing what I'm up to, kinda, it's writerlyonao3. I'll use it to post any fanart I draw in my off-time and things like that. I think the only ones following me there right now are burbear and a mutual dear friend, so I'm not sure if I'll announce story updates over there, but who knows? Maybe?

Okay, I'll see you all later. :-}
It's another interlude! I really hope you guys like it because, whelp, there's more of this to come. :'D

I'm sorry for the late replies to all your lovely comments. I swear I read every single one of them multiple times, and they bring me so much joy, and I always try to get back to them before posting the next chapter. I'm hoping once I get a little more used to my new work schedule I'll be able to reply sooner! <3

Many thanks to burbear, as always!

UPDATE 7/OCT/17: Added an illustration at the top of the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
A buzzer goes off, loud and urgent next to Elisabet's head. She pushes herself off of her desk with a gasping breath, rubbing away the thread of drool clinging to her chin. Fuck, fuck, it's 11:25 – that's hardly enough time to run to the bathroom and back before her meeting.

Shit. Fuck.

She activates her Focus' menu and turns off the alarm with the eye tracker function as she grabs her empty mug and hightails it to the nearest bathroom. Lost in planning out the following four minutes as precisely and effectively as possible, she almost bumps right into one of the guys leaving the bathroom, and mumbles a quick apology – to Joshua? Jason? – while she slips inside.

It's a Sunday, thank god, meaning less than half of FAS' staff is currently on-site in the facility and the bathroom blessedly empty. Most people prefer to work from home or campus during the
weekend.

Most.

Elisabet holds her hands under the faucet and splashes her face with water, washing off the remnants of sleep still there. She leans in on the mirror, squinting at her blurred reflection until she can see the dark circles under her eyes in all their sleep-deprived beauty. Some stress zits, as well.

She re-pins her hair behind her ears and fills her mug with water, finishing it quick enough to grab a refill before she has to go back. Taking a paper towel with her, she dabs her face dry walking through the hall back to her desk. 1129, her Focus reads, which should leave her with just enough time to sit down again –

Someone beat her to it, a blurred human-shaped mass filling her chair for her. He's early. Elisabet ignores the fluttering nerves in her stomach and sticks to her walking pace. The meeting was supposed to start at 1135, and she'd expected him to be five minutes early, not more.

Her chair swivels to face her. “And here I thought I could finally catch you sleeping on the job,” Ted Faro, CEO of the company, says in his faux-friendly manner, his tone that says you can trust me and we're a family at FAS, and Elisabet gives him a smile.

“I would never, sir,” she says, accepting his hand when he rises to greet her. His grip is firm, but so is hers, and she doesn't release a moment before he does.

He laughs, offering her desk back to her with a sweep of his arm, and she sets down her mug, leaning her back against the desk's edge. “I wouldn't really mind if you did,” Ted says. “You've done some amazing stuff under Sean's lead. Those engine tweaks? With the renewable fuel source – that's good, that's exactly what we're looking for.”

She feels the heat rising to her cheeks, but keeps her eyes steady on Ted's blurred face. “Thank you, sir,” she says. “Sean's team has been very supportive and welcoming.”

“Please, call me Ted.” He shifts his stance, standing only a few feet in front of her, both hands in his pockets, and it feels as though something just changed in their conversation, a darker shadow falling under his brows. “But I wouldn't be here without good reason,” he says, and the nerves are back, rolling around like a kid in a ball-pit.

“Of course not... Ted,” Elisabet says, keeping her face as neutral as possible, but she can't stop her fingers from grasping the edge of the desk, nails pressing against the underside of the tabletop.

He nods once, in acknowledgment of – something Elisabet can't quite catch on to. “While I'm glad to hear you've been enjoying your time with Sean, I'm sad to say it'll come to an end soon,” he says, and this time Elisabet can't stop her face from reacting.

Is he... firing her?

He can't be, she's had nothing but good reviews from her peers and colleagues so far, has finished all her assignments, and her contract –

“I'm not sure I follow,” she says carefully, forcing her breathing to stay low and steady, and then the man grins, wide enough for the white of his teeth to show, even without her glasses.

“You're moving up the chain, Lisbet!” he says, taking one of his hands out of his pockets to make a fist-pump type of movement. “Forget Junior Scientist, how about Chief Scientist instead?”
As soon as her heart starts beating again, the first thing out of her mouth is, “What about Sean?”

Ted waves his hand. “Sean, Sean – don't worry about the man, Lis. I can call you Lis, right? He's moving on from environmental designs to a different branch, he'll enjoy the change of scenery.” He's looking at her, taking her in, seeing something he doesn't quite like. “Come on, Lis. Be happy, show a little cheer,” he says. “I got you good, didn't I? Thought you were a goner, right?”

She forces a laugh, ducking her head low to spare herself from having to force the full smile as well. “You certainly did, sir– Ted,” she adds, and hopes her tone doesn't fall flat. “This is not what I was expecting. It's almost too much.”

“Glad you tacked on the 'almost' at the end there, Lis,” Ted says. “Because... it's not. We've had a meeting with the board and everyone agrees – you could be our next Jimmy Cormack. You ready for that?”

There's nothing, no words she can think of in reply. Jimmy Cormack was the silent genius behind the Focus' design. She saw him once when he gave a pep-talk on campus. He'd been inspiring, a man who'd been able to stay humble through his success. For people to compare her to him – that's absurd.

Ted gives her a pat on the shoulder. “Good answer,” he says, leaning in close to wink at her, and then he steps back again. “Take the day off. Shut down your desk, go out, celebrate.”

---

She eats instant noodles for lunch and takes her notebook with her down into the basement to one of the empty auditoriums. Leaving the lights dimmed at 20%, she settles down on one of the cushioned benches and starts answering her emails.

Going out is a distraction. Celebrating will be sleeping in her bed tonight instead of a chair and watching a few holo-flicks.

Maybe she'll call her mother...

There's a two hour period where it seems like her plan to stay at work until at least 1700 will work, but then there's a Focus call incoming, the name TED FARO flashing in white letters. *Fuck.*

She yanks her glasses off her nose and half-throws them down on the table before answering, because of course he would call holo. His face shows up in blue and purple lines in front of her. “Hello, sir,” she says. “What can I do for you?”

He isn't looking at her directly, instead fixed on what is probably his own computer screen. “Call me Ted, and explain what you're doing, exactly?” He leans back, resting his hands behind his neck as he makes eye contact. “Don't answer. This is probably how they celebrate at Carnegie-Mellon, right?”

“Something like that.”

“Right.” He sighs, rubbing a hand across his forehead. “Go home, Lis. That's an order.”

She swallows down her protests and nods instead. “See you tomorrow, sir.”

“Ted.”

“See you tomorrow, Ted.”
The first day of Elisabet’s new position marks the last day of Sean’s. It’s been a few weeks since Ted told her about the promotion, and most projects Sean was running have either been finished or finished up to a degree where Elisabet can easily take over.

The man is all smiles during the reception, his fatherly looks accentuated by the sweater he’s wearing. It’s his day off, after all. Elisabet keeps to the edge of the room, standing near one of the indoor citrus trees, but that doesn’t stop Sean from coming up to her with two glasses of bubbles.

“I couldn’t be prouder,” he says, handing her a glass, willfully ignorant of all the eyes that turn and stare at the two of them.

Elisabet tries to do the same as she clinks her glass against his. “To science,” she says.

“And to you,” Sean adds, which isn't helping the blush she's already sporting.

“It's madness,” she says for his ears only, and he pauses, considers her.

“It's what this company needs.” He’s lowered his voice as well, moved a step closer to her. “I know this hasn't been easy for you – the move, the job – but in all my years here I've never come across someone with your passion, your love for this work, who also possesses the skills and innate ability to realize those ideas. Not on my watch.”

“Stop it,” Elisabet says, letting her eyes glide over the rest of the room, but she can't stop a small smile from forming on her lips.

“You're half my age, just imagine what you'll be doing in twenty years time,” he adds in a lighthearted tone.

Despite their differences in age and experience, Sean has always treated her like his equal, and he's been an exception. Even though FAS is a relatively young company, most people working here are easily five years older than Elisabet, and for most of them, they didn't start out as a Junior Scientist without previous job experience.

There's always that look of apprehension when they first meet her, as if they're wondering how the job landed in her lap, exactly.

But it wasn't like that, with Sean.

“I’ll miss you,” she says, and as the words come out she feels the emotion behind them reaching for her throat, and she quickly takes a sip from her glass.

Sean notices it too. “Oh, there's no need for such seriousness, is there?” he says. “I'll only be four floors away! Imagine the tragedy it would've been if they'd moved me to the twentieth. We would definitely never see each other, ever again.”

She snorts, shaking her head. “It would be the worst.”

He stays with her a little longer, observing the rest of the reception around them in silence. Then someone from PR pops up and whisks Sean away, saying something about an interview. He turns around to give her a final smile that is both happy and sad, and raises his glass to her once more.

Elisabet swallows thickly, returning the gesture. It isn't a real goodbye, but it feels like one nonetheless. She finishes her drink quicker than she probably should considering etiquette and all
that, but the reception is pretty much over anyway and she'd like to go home, now.

The cloakroom downstairs is empty, leaving Elisabet plenty of space to sit on one of the low benches to change her shoes, massaging the back of her heels before slipping into her flats. It doesn't feel real yet – being Chief Scientist.

She takes her glasses out of her handbag and puts them on, blinking as her surroundings shift back into focus, and then again when she sees Ted Faro round the corner, calling her name and taking big strides towards her.

“You're not thinking of going home, are you?” he asks, and for a second she fears she's forgotten something on her to-do list, like sending someone a message or saving progress to the backup server.

“If there's something that needs to be done here, I can go back –”

“No, no,” he says, cutting her off. “The dinner party! Don't tell me you forgot about it.”

Shoot.

Was there a dinner party? *Tonight*?

She's wearing a neutral shirt and neutral pants. It's one of the most boring, most non-dinner party material outfits she can think of, all of that besides the point where she really, *really* hadn't planned on doing anything other than going home early, tonight.

“I can't,” she says. “I'm really not in the – ” *mood*.

He cuts her off again. “The invite was sent two weeks ago. You're on the list, Lis,” he says, leaning his head back to stare at the ceiling. “You're our newest, youngest Chief Scientist and you're on the list. Anyone who is anything will be there, you can't *not* go.”

When he looks back at her and tilts his head to the side, she can see he's looking a bit flushed. “Unless you're feeling ill, of course,” he says, like it's an afterthought. “Jimmy Cormack flew out all the way from NYC to meet you. It would honestly *suck* if that had been for nothing.”

She can't remember getting an invite but damn it, Jimmy Cormack wants to meet her?

*Fuck.*

“In that case…” She stands, removes her glasses and puts them back in her bag, giving Ted a smile – one she has practiced many times in front of the mirror. “There isn’t much of a choice,” she says, faking just enough enthusiasm.

Ted is ecstatic. “Awesome, Lis! I knew you'd pull through,” he says, helping her to her feet, and promises, “You won't regret this.”

---

She regrets it.

Ted, being the kind of man he is, takes her to the party, arriving what is called *fashionably Ted-late,* but in this case it's less about customs and more to let everyone know just who they're dealing with. He doesn't have to socialize because he already has everything.

His presence is a gift, and it's treated like that the moment he sets foot into the establishment, Elisabet following on his heel.
“Stick close,” he tells her as he pushes a cocktail glass in her hand. He leans in close enough for her to smell the alcohol on his breath. “This is where it all happens, Lis.” He walks around her, placing both hands on her shoulders and guides her gaze along the room, saying, “We're gonna make you happen. These people don't even know what's about to –”

A man closes in on them from the left, eyes wide and mouth half open. “Ted fucking Faro!” He laughs, holding out his hand to Ted. “It's been ages! Greg, Greg Clarck, remember me?”

As quick as he'd moved behind her, he's gone again, his attention fully shifted to the man. “My man, am I glad to see you,” Ted says without looking back, and Greg leads him away towards the bar.

So much for those introductions.

There's a dance floor to her left, a large viewing screen to her right, and people everywhere in between, clustered in groups, chatting away loudly. At first she tries to spot familiar faces in the crowd, and when that fails, other women – but for all FAS' policies on gender equality, this is a party where she's vastly outnumbered.

She downs the cocktail, which is sickeningly sweet and not that high in alcohol, before following Ted from a distance and heading to the bar.

After ordering another cocktail and sitting down on a bar stool, she opens her Focus' menu, hesitating over her list of friends. She hasn't spoken to any of them in weeks. Months, even. Messaging them now to complain about an exclusive party would seem like a brag and a total dick move.

Fuck.

And her mom is already asleep, of course.

She sips her drink and finally settles on Sean's name, working out a short text to let him know she's looking forward to seeing him over breaks without going into detail about where she is or what she's doing.

It doesn't take long for him to respond in a sweet note where he once again congratulates her and gives some solid advice, namely... to go to bed early.

“Thanks, dad,” Elisabet mutters under her breath. She closes her Focus, twirling her glass at its stem.

Fascinating how alone one can feel surrounded by so many people. This isn't her scene, her forte, and she should leave, go home. Get those few extra hours of sleep before the next day. Forget Ted's 'we're gonna make you a superstar' bullshit, she already has the best job at the best company she could hope for.

Out of seemingly nowhere, Ted appears next to her. “Lis, hey Lis, so sorry about that,” he says, his hair tousled and a new drink in hand, “minor detour, but now we're all about you again, you with me?”

Elisabet clenches her jaw and smiles when she turns to him. “I appreciate it but I should go.”

“How? What do you mean, go? You just got here, it would be a mistake to leave so soon.” He puts his drink down, holding out his hand to her, making a beckoning motion. “C'mere, we're gonna find Jimmy, set you up real nice, get you guys talking –”

She shakes her head, getting up from the stool and pulling the strap of her handbag onto her
shoulder. “I have to leave.”

“What are you talking about?” he says, making a wider gesture at the room, the people, the lights and the holo-images flashing everywhere. “This right here is one of the most important platforms you’ll encounter in your entire working life, trust me –”

“Sir, please.”

Ted's hands stop moving and his face falls. Swallowing once, Elisabet keeps her chin up, looking the man in the eye. Everyone around them is still talking, dancing, drinking, but the air between the two of them feels like a different place, and she isn't sure whether the man will shout or plead in reply.

He does neither, rubbing a hand over his forehead. “You're not enjoying yourself,” he says, his words carrying a severity more befitting Elisabet's own mood. He steps in, lowering his arms. “Listen, Lis... This isn't work. I know I keep going on about connections and results – forget about that for a second, okay? It's not important. Tell me what's wrong.”

Her resolve gives way, and her shoulders slump. She's tired, not so much in the physical sense as mentally. “I'm not... I don't know anyone here, and –” she gestures at herself, “– I'm not even dressed right for this event.”

Ted rests a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it. “Lisbet, hey,” he says in a softer tone of voice. “I'm glad you're being honest with me.”

It feels good to have said it out loud. “I just don't feel like I belong,” she admits, and Ted is nodding along with her, giving her arm another squeeze.

“I know what that's like, I absolutely do,” he says. “Listen, Lis – it doesn't matter what you're wearing. You look fine. I could come in here wearing training shorts and a hoodie and they'd still love me, because this isn't about looks, it's about what you bring to the table. Now just hang on –”

Ted leans over the bar, signaling the bartender over and orders something Elisabet can't hear over the sounds around them, but moments later he's handed two drinks with ice in short tumblers. He passes one off to Elisabet before she can refuse, saying, “You still want to meet Jimmy, right?”

Chapter End Notes

It's a flashback, yaaaay!

I really hope you guys liked it, lol, because I'm a little nervous about posting it. I wanted to take a dive into Elisabet's past and flesh her out a bit more.

... well. That, and Ted fucking Faro. The next two chapters will be primarily about Elisabet and Ted, and their history before what we're shown in game.
I'm so glad most of you don't seem to mind this detour into Elisabet's past, lol. :D I had a lot of fun writing it.

There's some spoken Italian in this chapter. As I like to do with most of my fics, the translation will show up (in google chrome for sure) when you hover over the text. Test it out here!

As always, me me big grateful to burbear.

Elisabet leans into the pillows, resting her elbow on the back of the seat, cupping her chin in her hand. She still has a drink in her other, although she's lost count as to what number she's on. It doesn't matter. Her eyelids are getting heavier, but not in a bad way. Just buzzed.

Jimmy Cormack is a giggling heap in the seat opposite her, his body shaking so much he almost topples over onto the floor if Ted wasn't sitting next to him, keeping him upright by the arm.

“And then I said – then I said, that shit Hendrikson tried to pull will never fly,” Ted says, almost as giddy as Jimmy. “The board will fuck you right over if you ever do that again, and he just looks at me and goes, fuck the board.”

Jimmy lets out a howl of a laugh, and Elisabet finds herself chuckling along, even if she hasn't been following the conversation for more than five minutes now. This is nice, sitting here. Ted took her away from the main area after talking to her at the bar, past a security guard and to a more private location.

He'd kept his promise. Meeting Jimmy Cormack was great, even if he was drunk from the start, but he knew her name, knew what kind of work she did, and it's been more than an hour and she's still sitting with them.

“Can you believe this guy?” Jimmy asks. It takes a moment for Elisabet to notice the question being directed at her.

She raises her glass to them and says, “Head of FAS, right there, everybody,” which is enough to set Jimmy off on another bout of laughter.

Ted locks eyes with her, and from this distance she can't see whether or not he's as amused by her comment as Jimmy is, but she smiles at him anyway before taking a sip of her drink.

“What can I say, it's all true,” Ted says before rising out of his seat. “I'm gonna grab some air, you wanna come with, Lis?”

Not sure if it's a request or an order, Elisabet takes Ted's hand and lets him help her up, then follows him out back to an open area with an artificial garden. It takes her a moment to realize Jimmy isn't joining them. Did she cross a line back there?
A large raised fountain dominates the garden, and Ted sits down on its edge, patting the empty spot next to him. They're pretty much alone, with only a few other people sitting at the back of the garden, out of earshot.

Elisabet sits, putting her glass down on the edge between her and Ted. He's sizing her up, nodding his head a little as he does.

“Having fun now, Lis?” he asks.

“It definitely beats sitting around at home, alone,” she says.

He nods again, stretching out his legs in front of him before crossing them at the ankles. “Good, that's good. I'm real glad to hear it.”

The music playing inside stops for a moment, creating the opportunity for someone to speak a few lines into the mic, but the sound is no longer intelligible when it reaches her and Ted. People cheer and applaud before the music’s back, bass loud enough the feel it through the floor.

“Listen... I wanna get to know you better,” Ted says. “I know what you're like at work, diligent, hard-working, brilliant, but we're not at work right now.” He pauses, tapping the fountain's ridge. “I think it's important to see the person behind the job, so tell me, who's the real Elisabet Sobeck?”

She stares at him, her mind a blank. Fuck, who is she? A ranch girl from outside Carson City, her mother's pride and joy? A scientist even when she isn't clocked in at work? A girl who set fire to a tree in her backyard because she was too busy experimenting to think of the risks?

Ted laughs, pulling her from her thoughts. “We can get more booze if you need it, I've got all night,” he says, and she responds with a laugh of her own, showing her half full glass to him. “Start with something easy. How old were you again, twenty-one?”

“Twenty-two,” she says.

“You are not,” Ted replies, and his Focus shifts color. “Huh, you are. Birthday last week.”

She nods. “Same day every year, March eleventh.”

“Congratulations. So who... er, whom did you celebrate it with?”

“No one,” she says, taking a sip from her drink to occupy herself while Ted reacts, leaning away from her.

“You're joking, come on.” When she doesn't reply he shakes his head. “Friends, family, partner...”

A twenty minute call home after work was all she'd done that day. That, and buy five donuts to eat them all by herself for dinner while watching the ‘39 anniversary re-release of The Wizard of Oz.

Ted pauses, clearly mulling over her non-reaction, his hands folded in his lap. “You could get anyone to join you,” he then says, scooting closer and opening his hands to form a cup. “You're the type of girl no one in their right mind will say no to – you could ask any guy on the work floor.”

She's glad she isn't drinking the moment Ted's words hit her, because the laugh that comes out of her throat is instantaneous, rough around the edges. “That's not what my girlfr-- my ex said when they broke up with me,” she says, tripping over her words. Cold starts to spread along her back the moment she realizes what she just admitted to. She glances at Ted from the corner of her eye, and shit, he definitely caught her slip-up.
The wide-eyed expression on his face doesn't change much when he says, “So you're into that,” followed by some quick waving of his hands. “Not – not that there's anything wrong with that. There's no discriminating at FAS for any reason. You're aware of that, right?”

She is. The fact that FAS so openly advertised their policies on the matter did help her feel a degree of certainty in her decision to move to the FAS campus immediately. Not just because of her own identity, but she wouldn't want to work in an environment that didn't do anything about racism, either.

Ted coughs. “Is it just girls, or...”

“I don't feel comfortable putting a label to it, but... anyone, if they're the right fit, you know,” Elisabet says, mumbling the last part against the edge of her glass, not looking at Ted.

“Cool, that's cool,” she hears him say. “I don't want to ruin your evening so feel free to ignore me if it's too forward, but what happened between you two?

Thinking back to it still hurts, even though it happened months ago and it was a mutual breakup. Elisabet misses her, even misses the stupid arguments that would make both of them cry until they sat down and talked it through.

“We were in a rough patch when the job offer came,” she says, staring at a spot off in the background. “She uh... wasn't into the whole, long distance relationship, so that's where that ended.”

Ted whistles. “Job before everything, huh?”

“That's me,” she croaks.

Without warning, Ted's hand touches her back, a warm weight pressed against her. He stands, urging her to do the same. “Let's get you another drink.”

---

It takes a while to get used to her new responsibilities, to how the team – her team – reacts when she wants to push a project forward, or tells them that she wants to see results, soon. It's good work, even if by the end of the day she's always tired. There is no time off, there are only hours she gets to spend at home instead of at the facilities.

Whenever they work with a client, which is most of the time, things tend to get even busier, juggling multiple projects at the same time, but her team is honestly the best she could hope for and their approval rate is constantly high.

She doesn't see Ted in person that often, which is a relief. He hasn't done anything she can point out that has made her uncomfortable, but there's something... strange in the way he treats her. It's probably nothing.

Another long day passes. FAS decided to switch servers and it's causing major problems across all departments. It'll take another week to sort everything out but until then, they're working with back-up systems and sometimes even pen and paper. Elisabet's been sporting a headache for days.

She's overseeing the final back-up of the day being made when TED FARO flashes on her Focus. She adjusts her glasses and picks up, greeted by the smooth voice of a newscaster talking about crime rates across America. Then the holo jumps in, and it's Ted's face turned away from her.

It isn't the first time he's called her like this, and while it worried her in the beginning, by now she's
so used to it it's becoming an annoyance.

“What's going on?” she asks, keeping her tone calm and level.

He hums, still not facing her. “Where are you going?”

“Home, why?”

There's a silence that lasts just this side of too long before he says, “Come see me in my office, five minutes.”

The holo-call disconnects, leaving Elisabet alone in her temporary work space. She's gaping at thin air, because what on earth was that? Is she in trouble?

She arrives on Ted's floor early, his assistant nowhere to be found, so she lets herself into his office. Ted is still watching the news, sitting in his chair, tapping his chin with a stylus. He doesn't look up, and if it isn't a no she'll count it as a yes.

She steps further into the room, laying her coat on the back of one of the more comfortable chairs. There's a labelless paper bag resting on the opposite chair, which is curious. Why would Ted order anything in a paper bag? He's a neat and meticulous man, he wouldn't leave unnecessary packaging lying around for no reason.

Elisabet rubs a hand over her face, then turns and walks up to his desk. “You wanted to see me?”

“Mm... yes,” Ted says, finally swiveling around to look her in the eye, and he frowns. “Are you still wearing those glasses?”

Here we go.

She pushes her glasses a little higher onto the bridge of her nose, saying, “I don't wear them as a fashion statement, you know.”

“Jesus, Lis. Do I have to remind you again that lasik is a basic human right at our company?”

Shaking her head, she refuses to answer him, instead looking off to the side, at the screen that's mounted on the wall. The news is still running, a reporter showing some statistics to the viewers.

“Why did you ask me to come see you?” she asks, this time in a softer tone of voice, knowing he tends to listen better to her whenever she presents some form of... not weakness, but a less confrontational version of herself.

It works, Ted finally switching off the TV and giving her his full attention. “We're going out for dinner.”

She's glad she's holding onto the edge of his desk, giving her something to dig her fingers into. “What?” she asks, unable to keep shock from coloring her words. Is he coming on to her, is that what's happening here? All those comments from her co-workers, about how he favors her...

God, it can't be.

“Wow, hey.” Ted backs away from her, rolling his chair up against the wall. “Nothing weird, okay,” he says, “but it's your birthday, and I did tell you last time we spoke I was gonna make you celebrate it this time.”

The last time they spoke in person is weeks ago, and it must've been then because there's no record
of any 'birthday dinner' in her notes. “Right,” she says, holding back on her protests a moment where she studies Ted closely. Then, “I'm not sure I can take the night off.”

He waves a hand, getting out of his chair to walk around the desk and come face her. “Nonsense,” he says. “I've seen the projections, you're way ahead of schedule.”

“And I'd like to keep it that way,” Elisabet interjects, but the man carries on as if she hasn't spoken at all.

“You're gonna go out tonight, have a great time, and heck, you can get tomorrow morning off.” Ted goes over to the sitting area and plucks the paper bag from the chair, extending it out towards her by the tips of his fingers. “I even made sure your attire won't be getting in the way, this time,” he says with a smile, like he's done her a favor, and waits until she takes the bag from him.

Peering inside reveals a slick red fabric covered by thin paper sheets and a small but chic card with curved writing. Enjoy your evening feeling flawless, fearless and fabulous. The brand name is printed underneath, and it's one Elisabet recognizes, for once.

Even with her respectable pay grade, this dress is something she would never be able to afford for such a simple occasion. She immediately tries to hand it back, but Ted steps out of the way, holding up his hands.

“This one is yours,” he says. “Happy birthday, Lis.”

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She couldn't say no to that.

There's a limo waiting for them outside the main building, and Ted even holds the door for her, something she's never seen him do for anyone. She has to remind herself a few times that he's doing this because he values her as a person, and not out of some twisted power dynamic that favors him ultimately. Nothing weird, he said so himself.

Has her work really been that good? Is Ted honestly that kind of person?

She gives him a smile when he sits across her, having cleaned up a bit himself. He's wearing a sleek black suit – some things never go out of fashion – and brushed his hair back. The dress he bought her is a perfect fit, a design that wraps around her body without suffocating it, the sweetheart neckline not too low but still showing off a fair amount of skin.

It looks gorgeous on her, as does the pearl necklace that came with it.

She presses her legs against each other, crossing them at the ankles, and accepts the drink Ted offers her. It's not weird, it's definitely not weird.

There's some small talk and Ted cracks a few jokes, mostly at his own expense, before they arrive at the restaurant. Elisabet has a moment where her brain completely freezes, looking at the facade of the building. Black, gold, and glass set the tone of the establishment, the open kitchen visible from the street outside. A spectacle.

Ted holds out his arm to her and she accepts, resting her hand loosely in the crook of his elbow. God, this is the kind of place she has dreamed of taking her mother to, one she's secretly been saving up for... to repay her for all those years of dedication and sacrifice.

They're seated in a private section on the second floor balcony, one that has a great view of the
kitchen below. Ted pulls out a chair for her, then sits across the table for two.

“You've gone awfully quiet, Lis,” he remarks.

She shakes her head a little. “It's a... generous gesture of you, this evening,” she says, nodding her thanks to their attendant when they pour her a glass of water.

Ted laughs loudly. “It's your birthday, you deserve it,” he says. “Don't be ridiculous.”

He's right. It actually is her birthday, although she'd mostly forgotten about it by the time she'd arrived on the work floor. Twenty-three years old and a Chief Scientist at FAS – she's still one of their youngest.

“A toast,” Ted proclaims, lifting his glass after their first drinks arrive. “To say to you what so many people would like to but will never get the chance... If it weren't for your wits, your integrity, and your commitment, the world would be a darker place.”

They clink their glasses even as Elisabet shakes her head, feeling the heat rising to her cheeks. She's just doing her job, as a scientist and as a human being, and if she wasn't here someone else would be.

The hors d'oeuvres are served not long after that, and for the moment Elisabet finds herself enjoying the quiet as they eat.

Of course, Ted being Ted, this doesn't last, and after making a comment on the food he waves the hand holding his fork. “I was just remembering when you first joined the company,” he says, and goes on a tangent of how he always knows talent when he sees it.

Elisabet smiles, makes sure she keeps drinking so she doesn't have to answer, and offers the appropriate sounds and hums whenever he pauses to see if she's still following. She is, but with a half-mind only. God, she could've been home by now. She almost wishes she was, were it not for the incredible food and ambiance.

Somewhere halfway through the meal there's finally a chance for her to gain the upper hand in the conversation when Ted asks about her pet project, one she's been working on for at least six months now, on the side.

“It's a lot harder than I expected, initially.” she admits, and Ted nods in understanding. “Creating a true AI on its own is a challenge, but to implement a stable personality to such a degree that it will act according to a set of morals...”

Ted lifts his glass away from his lips, pointing a finger at her. “You're only running simulations so far, right? No real true AI testing – you know we can't have any of that going on without the proper permits.”

“Of course,” she says, quickly. “This is all – simulation work only. Experimenting on a true AI like that would bring too many risks with it, even if I got the permits.”

“Good, good.” Ted drinks from his glass, looking down at the kitchen. One of the chefs is currently preparing his second course. “Listen, Lis,” he says without moving, “I really appreciate your commitment –”

“Theodor?” A lilting voice interrupts them, and Elisabet looks over her shoulder where a woman slightly older than her stands, sleek blonde hair, wrapped in an elegant, off-white dress with wide shoulders that falls just over her knees. “Dio mio, is that you?”
Ted lifts his face and every remnant of the serious tone that carried their conversation vanishes. He gets up from his chair and greets her with open arms next to Elisabet. “Conetta, my darling, tesoro mio, what brings you here?”

Elisabet turns her head to the side while they're wrapped in each other's arms, giving them some form of privacy and her the chance to down half her glass in one go. Might as well make the evening more enjoyable.

“I'm sorry, I have not met you before,” she hears the woman say and it takes a moment to realize who she's speaking to.

When she looks back Ted has stepped away and gone off to do who knows what, and god, those are really, really blue eyes. She mentally snaps herself from her daze and holds out her hand. “Elisabet Sobeck – Dr. Elisabet Sobeck,” she says, and can't help the satisfaction it brings her when the woman's eyes pop open even further.

“You work with Theodor,” the woman says, shaking Elisabet's hand with her soft, manicured one. “I have heard great things of you... Piacere, mi chiami Constanta.”

“Piacere,” Elisabet replies smoothly, their hands lingering a moment before Ted is back at the table, their attendant in tow.

He gestures at Constanta and the table, saying, “Just get her a chair and then have her join us for the second course, alright?” Only then does he actually look at Constanta and say, “If that's what you want.”

Constanta takes a step back from Elisabet, releasing her hand, and she wishes Ted could've stayed away a little longer.

“Of course, if I am not intruding,” Constanta says, meeting Elisabet's eyes.

Ted waves a hand in the air. “You're not, don't be silly. Get her a chair and some wine, alright?”

When their attendant hesitates, looking to Elisabet as well for confirmation, Ted shoos them. “C'mon, get moving, look what she's walking around on!”

While it's true that the heels Constanta is wearing look anything but comfortable, the way Ted treats their attendant makes Elisabet feel a pang of shame. She isn't the only one, judging from the way Constanta holds her hands in front of her and says, “Mah, Theodor, va bene...”

Their attendant already rushed away. Ted stretches out his arms as if to say, what've I done wrong?

It doesn't take long for Constanta to be seated at their table and given a glass of her own, and then the conversation shifts from talking shop to talking small, again, and Elisabet sits and nods and drinks while Ted flirts with the woman in a way that is meant to be subtle, but isn't. At all.

“Connie handles a part of my PR in Europe,” Ted tells her, the answer to a question she never asked. “When she isn't off somewhere looking pretty, seducing future business partners.”

Constanta must have the patience of a saint if this is how he usually treats her, because she sits with more grace than Elisabet can pull off even when she's sober and smiles at Ted's words like he didn't just degrade an important part of her job to looking pretty.

“Quello deve essere difficile,” Elisabet says, not missing the way Ted's brows furrow as she looks at Constanta. “I'm not sure I could handle responsibility like that.”
Constanta’s smile becomes something more, her eyes softening and the apples of her cheeks gaining some color. “Sei troppo gentile,” she says, “ma mi sembra molto più difficile il tuo lavoro.”

“All right ladies.” Ted leans back on his chair, crossing his arms briefly. “That’s enough of that, okay? For all I know you’re gossiping about me.” He says the words with a humorous undertone, but there’s no mistaking the cold in his eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you spoke Italian, too,” Elisabet says, feigning her ignorance.

Ted’s grin is all teeth. “Conversationally, yes.”

She tilts her head towards Constanta, raising her glass to her lips and utters, “Pensavo che quello fosse stavamo facendo...” under her breath before taking a sip. Then she flashes the most innocent look she can muster at Ted.

“Very funny,” he says, and she can almost see the tension in his jaw from him trying not to grind his teeth. Meanwhile Constanta hides a smile behind her hand, wisely refraining from any further comments on the matter.

It’s the most fun Elisabet’s had all night before Ted once again dominates the table by leading the topic of conversation back to him. It takes a while before she catches on, but the closer she inspects Constanta’s reactions, the more it seems like she’s only entertaining him for the sake of politeness. Even when she responds to one of his more flirtatious jokes, she never crosses the line of true engagement.

By the time they’re done with dessert, Constanta bids them farewell and embraces Elisabet, kissing both her cheeks and pressing a business card into one of her hands.

“Il mio numero privato, se vuoi parlare,” she says next to Elisabet’s ear in a way that makes the hairs on the back of her neck rise, giving her another true smile before stepping away.

Elisabet tucks the card away into one of the dress’ discreet pockets before Ted seems to notice its existence.

Chapter End Notes

One more part of the interlude to go. :)

A thank you to dragoninatrenchcoat on tumblr for giving me some correction for the Italian! Much appreciated!
Late update! I know ; u ; Anyhoo, I also added a quick sketch to the beginning of chapter 19, for anyone who wants to see what I imagine a young Elisabet Sobeck to look like.

I have to get my butt to the kick off of 24 Hour Comic day in less than an hour, so I'm gonna keep this quick. Everyone who has left comments but hasn't gotten a reply yet - I LOVE YOU?? I'll reply, I promise! I can't believe we've passed 300 kudos and are nearing 500 comments, oh my gosh, you guys? <3 <3 Thank you all for your continued support!

Of course my author's note wouldn't be complete without me singing praise to my lovely beta reader, burbear, who might as well be my alpha reader (if we're still using that term lmfao). Thanks bro, don't know what I'd do without you! <3

EDIT: I'm adding a CONTENT WARNING - there's a scene in this chapter that might be triggering for some people as it concerns unwanted intimacy / attempted sexual assault (although that might be a bit too heavy of a descriptor for this scene). If you're sensitive to these kind of scenarios, you can best skip the scene from the point where Ted and Lis are alone till the next scene break ("---"). After that point there is only referencing to what happened between the two.

September '48 is the first time Elisabet finds herself reading a notice on a possible change in the company's stance on automated military platforms.

She scoffs, sends off a reply that can easily be read as a hell no and goes on with her day, knowing at least her branch of FAS will not be interested in creating anything along those lines. It's too bad Sean retired a year ago, or else she would've had his support in her decision, undoubtedly.

Then in mid-December, she finds herself looking at a project summary detailing one of those hellish designs. Starting date: early January.

Her office feels too small, too many things stuffed together inside those four walls, and she excuses herself from her colleagues, her team, heading downstairs and then outside, towards the edge of the campus.

She's on her third cigarette by the time she reaches her usual sitting spot, nausea growing, gripping every part of her body from the inside out. She hovers over TED FARO in her Focus' menu. Where is he? Why didn't he tell her in person?

This coming month marks her ninth year working for his goddamn company – and he knows what her stance is on these... fucking murder bots.
Is that why? Because he knows she'll refuse?

The indignant rage that follows motivates Elisabet to call Sean. She spends the better half of fifteen minutes yelling at him until she's near the point of tears, and Sean, in all his well-meaning wisdom, lets her.

He lets her work through the emotions, sharing a part of her grief, and only when she's done does he speak his mind, asking her gently about her own feelings beyond these projects. “You won't be able to change his mind,” he says. “I implore you to try – you, out of all of us, hold the most chance at success... but I don't think Ted will let you convince him of letting this go.”

“I can't believe he'd do this,” she mutters. “It goes against everything... everything FAS stands for. Innovation to create a better world, you don't do that by making something that will kill thousands.”

There's a long silence wherein she can only hear Sean breathe until he says, “Does it really come to you as a surprise?” The words are spoken in a way that doesn't downgrade what she's been telling him, but as a soft reminder of who they're dealing with. “Ted will always follow the money.”

She laughs because if she doesn't, she'll cry.

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Ted is a tough man to find the following days, and even tougher to speak to. He's constantly stuck in meetings or away from campus, or so his assistant tells Elisabet every time she tries to pin his location down.

She's been practicing every god damn variant of the conversation she plans to have with Ted in her mind, thinking of a counter argument for every fucking lie he'll try to spin her. By god, she'll leave FAS if it comes down to it.

There are laws in place that prevent her from taking the projects she's working on with her, but she knows a part of her team will follow her example, and together... they'd be able to continue the work. Not everything will be the same, but with what FAS is slowly becoming, she doesn't want it to be.

A part of her is already letting go of the place she's been able to call her home for so long.

The twenty-fourth is the day she's finally able to locate Ted, having received a message from his assistant detailing his whereabouts. The office, of all places. Her surprise is short lived when she arrives to find people everywhere, alcohol being distributed freely, loud music and flashing lights – Holo-text hovers above the middle of an impromptu dance floor, spelling out Happy Birthday Ted! in 3-D print, the letters twisting and twirling in mid-air.

Most people here she doesn't even recognize, all of them in their early twenties. Students, probably. This isn't a birthday bash, it's a commercial, a play to invite new blood into the family, because Ted knows FAS will need it.

The disgust Elisabet feels is visceral as she wades through the masses. She tries to get into an elevator to go up to Ted's office, but the scent of alcohol and weed combined with the squirming bodies inside make her leave and take a left into the stairwell.

The only people there are sitting on the steps, either nearing black-out drunk or talking in quiet voices, private conversations that cannot be held out in the open. Elisabet concerns herself with neither, taking her time to climb up.
In the end she enters one of the dark, empty floors and takes the private service elevator up the rest of the way, the music growing louder as she nears her destination.

Ted's office is filled with a few more familiar faces, some from the board, some of them colleagues from other departments... and a handful of too young, in over their heads college girls wearing short skirts and dresses that make Elisabet uncomfortable on their behalf.

The man of the hour is standing on top of his desk, performing an elaborate air guitar solo for the two girls sitting in his chair.

*You're thirty-five,* Elisabet thinks, positioning herself in the doorway, crossing her arms and holding on to her middle. This is the face of a company that has been the head of its sector for years now, a revolutionary the world looks to in times of need.

She watches the party unfold before her eyes for a few minutes, until someone inside recognizes her and shouts her name. All heads turn to her, and she steps away from the wall, giving a wave. Then Ted sees her, and he stops mid-performance to jump off his desk and come up to her.

“Elisabet Sobeck, everybody!” he shouts, grabbing her hand and holding it up into the air like she's a champion. “My right hand in saving this fucking planet!”

She presses her lips together, forcing a smile as she receives a loud applause from all directions of the room. Ted nudges her to take a bow with him, and she does, feeding into the cheers of their audience.

“I have to speak to you,” she says softly when they rise and turn to each other. “Alone.”

Ted nods, holding onto the sides of her arms. “Of course,” he answers. “Of course, anything for you. Everyone, we'll be right back! Don't forget to keep drinking, I need to recycle those bottles in the morning!”

The room erupts into more cheers and laughs as they leave, Ted leading her away from all the noise and people, to a part of the floor that isn't fully lit. He uses the iris scanner to open a locked door, revealing the empty boardroom.

“This private enough for you?” Ted asks, closing the door behind them before sitting on the edge of the long table. Waiting. Studying her.

Elisabet steps forward, her hands shoved into her pockets. “It'll do,” she says. “I want to talk to you about those military bots, and how –”

“I can't get over how great you look without those glasses,” Ted muses, leaning towards her ever so slightly. The lights are dimmed to less than 50% and a shiver runs down Elisabet's spine. “Told you lasik was the way forward. Sorry, right, you were saying something related to...”

She can't stop her mouth from falling open. *Even when she's standing right in front of him – !*

“I'm talking about your fucking plan to turn this company into a bunch of war-crime related lawsuits,” she snaps, pacing off to the side, to one of the big tinted glass windows. “It's not good, Ted. I've seen the plans and these things will kill relentlessly. Women, children, men, animals – anything with a fucking pulse.”

She crosses her arms again, hugging them to her midriff, and she can hear Ted rise to his feet behind her, coming to stand next to her.
“Come now, Lis,” he says, a hand hovering next to her elbow. “It won't be that bad.”

Letting her head rest against the edge of the window, Elisabet peers up at Ted, trying as hard as she can to get a read on him. She wets her lips, aware of how dry the rest of her mouth is, too. “You don't mean that,” she says softly. She nods towards the door, to the party happening without them. “You told them, out there, 'the man and woman who saved the world.' Does that mean nothing?”

Ted sighs, rubbing a hand across his forehead before leaning his side against the edge opposite Elisabet's. “It doesn't change anything,” he says. “FAS won't be selling them to people planning to use them on American soil, or any of our allies for that matter. There will be precautions...”

God, but the rest of the world will be an open playing field. Worse than Hiroshima and Nagasaki, worse than the fallout of 9/11. A way to privatize war on a continental scale.

Elisabet stumbles away from the window, towards the table where she plants both her hands on the wooden top, just to keep herself upright. He knows these machines will level cities and doesn't care. She's gasping for air, covers her mouth with one hand to stop herself from making any more noise.

How could this have happened?

She feels sick throughout her entire body, her throat threatening to close in on itself if she doesn't calm down, but this isn't what she'd imagined Ted's reaction to be like. Approval, perhaps, but the thoughtless hand-waving when it comes to innocent deaths is what shakes her to her core.

He's going to get them all killed.

She coughs, cursing the tears that appear at the edges of her vision, and then Ted is next to her, one hand rubbing along her back as he says, “Oh Lis... C'mon, please, don't do this. I hate seeing you like this.”

You're supposed to be a better person, she wants to say to him, but all that comes out is a laugh or a sob. At this point, it doesn't matter to her which of the two it is.

“C'mere,” Ted says, gently moving her into an upright position and letting her lean against his chest, embracing her. “I'm sorry, Lis. If I'd known you'd object this strongly... I'd have acted differently.”

Oh, but he did know. They've had numerous discussions over the years on AI intelligence and using it as a weapon, and all the moral questions that follow that line of thought. They've talked about it over breaks, over dinner, over lunch, in texts and holo-calls.

She never crossed the line of a soft maybe, refusing to speculate even the slightest chance of creating anything like the proposals FAS has received.

Ted's cologne invades her nose when she tries to breathe deeply, his arms holding her too tightly, trapping her own hands between their chests. “You knew,” she wheezes, struggling to draw enough air into her lungs without hyperventilating. “You didn't tell me because you knew. You invite these college kids around to deal with the fallout...”

He hushes her, stroking her hair, and the gesture makes her skin crawl.

“You kept it all under wraps and people are going to leave once they realize what you're turning this company into,” she presses on. “Those girls you've got in your office would beg for any job here and you're going to use them.”

“Shh, none of that now, Lis,” Ted says. “They're nobodies, who cares what happens to them. You'll
It's not about job security, it's about human decency. Elisabet gasps, pulling away from Ted as far as she can while his arms are still around her, and he lets her, looking her in the eyes as she does. “Please don't do this,” she says, begs. “Call your investors, tell them the deal's off. Find something else to make a profit on.”

One of Ted's hands moves up to cup her chin, to wipe away a tear she didn't even notice rolling off her waterline. “It's gonna be alright,” he says softly, before leaning in and closing the distance between their mouths.

Elisabet freezes, her hands turning into fists as Ted's tongue makes use of her surprise to slip inside her mouth, filling it with the sharp taste of alcohol. She presses her fists against his chest, trying to pull away, and he lets go of her lips only to latch onto her neck instead.

“Should have done this years ago,” he grumbles between the fervent display of lust and want.

She moves to the side, trying to get away from his mouth as far as possible. “Stop,” she says. “Stop it, Ted.” It doesn't seem like he's listening to her, so she pounds her fist on his chest to get his attention instead.

The warmth between their bodies is suffocating, implying a situation more intimate than she ever imagined herself and Ted to be in, together.

He tries to kiss her again, but she holds up her hand between them, blocking access to her mouth. Ted frowns, kissing her open palm instead. “Come on, Lisbet. I know it's not ideal, but this is something we both want,” he says, and she can't tell if he’s talking about the military bots or the forced intimacy or both.

The blood pounding in Elisabet's ears is so loud she can feel it at the back of her throat. She waits a few seconds without moving or speaking, taking the time to come back down to herself before saying, “Let go of me, sir.”

He does.

In a moment where neither of them seems sure of what to do next, Elisabet steps back, away from Ted. The man covers the lower part of his face with his hand, maybe in surprise, or shock at his own actions, Elisabet hopes.

He's about to say something, reaching towards her with an open hand, but Elisabet raises her own, stepping even further from him, before turning on her heel and walking to the door of the boardroom. “Lis, wait!”

Keeping her stride even, she leaves, not looking back.

---

She's able to hold herself together, presenting the relatively stable twenty-eight year old woman she is to the outside world, until she's standing on the porch of Sean's house and he opens the door. All it takes is his one look at her, the opening of his arms, and she walks into them, tears streaming down her face.

He leads her inside, sitting her down on the couch and offers her some tea before anything else. She
can hear Sean's partner enter the kitchen, and the two of them speak in hushed tones.

Leon pops his head around the corner of the doorway, waving at her from a distance. “I'll set up the guest bed. Don't you worry 'bout nothing, okay?” he says, and she nods in reply.

The tea calms her enough to get her talking again, with Sean sitting next to her, listening patiently as she recounts Ted's words on the matter. When she reaches the part where he kissed her, she falters, not sure what to call what happened between the two of them during that moment.

Sean leans towards her, resting his elbows on his knees. “What did he do?” he asks in a soft tone of voice.

She blows on her tea, shrugging one shoulder. “He um... forced himself on me, I guess.”

I guess. I guess.

There's no guessing needed. That's exactly what happened. She shouldn't be trying to minimize the damage, especially not for Ted, but here she sits...

Sean doesn't seem to be falling for it though, as he comes right out and asks, “Did he rape you?”

“God, no,” Elisabet says quickly. “He only kissed me.”

“But you did not want him to.”

She nods, a new wave of tears suddenly stripping her from her voice. “I thought it wasn't like that,” she whispers. “Thought being colleagues was all he wanted from me.”

How blind was she, to be able to ignore all the hints he must've been dropping. The expensive dinners, the gifts she wasn't allowed to return... She sets down her cup to bury her face in her hands. It's becoming all so clear now.

“It's not your fault,” she hears Sean say. “You're not even the first one.”

She laughs through her tears, the sound strangled and pained. She remembers blonde hair, blue eyes, and a charming Italian accent, and her heart sinks. “Is that why Constanta left?”

Sean hums. “Ted flings NDA's at anyone he even suspects of knowing something... but fuck him, that's exactly why she left.”

While it seems like it should bring her some relief to know that it isn't just her, it only makes her feel worse.

“I should've warned you,” Sean says, and Elisabet tries to tell him it's fine, but he won't hear any of it. “It was obvious he had a thing for you, but no one thought he would ever act on it.”

Elisabet lifts her head from her hands, wiping away the tears and taking a deep breath. “So stupid,” she says in a hoarse voice. She looks to Sean, giving him a smile that hurts the corners of her mouth. God, she should've known.

Shaking his head, Sean holds out his hand to her, squeezing hers hard when she accepts. “Not stupid, but the better person. That's what you are,” he says.

---

Her confrontation with Ted is a lot less dramatic than it sounds. She rides the elevator up to his
office, waits for his assistant to let her in, and walks up to his desk with the words, “I quit,” leaving her mouth before he can say hello.

Ted looks like shit.

It's been a few days since his birthday party, but you wouldn't be able to tell by the dark circles under his eyes and the wrinkles in his clothes.

He tries to reason with her, offers different jobs and projects, and when that doesn't work he tries to bargain, saying she'll never be able to find work in a place like FAS if she leaves.

“We'll see,” Elisabet says.

There's a pause, one wherein she can see him desperately trying to think of something to persuade her, and then he says, “If this is because of the party... I'm so sorry. I should've never done that. I was drunk, wasn't thinking clearly...”

Elisabet nods, accepting his apology.

“I'm not a rapist,” Ted says, lowering his voice. “I know I don't always make the right choices but I would never – I'm not like that.”

“I believe you,” Elisabet says, and she does. “But I'm not quitting over your indiscretions. I'm leaving this company because I don't feel comfortable getting the blood of millions on my hands.”

He's stunned into silence, and Elisabet makes use of the situation by dropping Leon's business card onto his desk.

“Anything else you want to discuss can be taken up with my lawyer,” she says, turning and leaving. She lingers at the door, looking over her shoulder one last time.

Nine years, so many projects and opportunities... and those moments where she did genuinely enjoy Ted's company and their discussions, even if their opinions were often wildly different. None of it is enough to make her stay and support a man who is unwilling to do the right thing, so easily swayed by unreasonable amounts of money.

“Goodbye, Ted.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be back in the normal timeline with Aloy and Lis. c:
Hey everyone! It feels like so much has happened in the past week. I tried to answer all your wonderful, sweet, insightful and overwhelmingly kind comments and there's still three in my inbox as I write this (I will get to you I promise!) but it's 4 AM and I really gotta drag my ass off to bed, SO:

CZGoldEdition drew an amazing picture for the chapter where Aloy braids Elisabet's hair - I was completely blown away when I saw it. Never has anyone ever drawn fanart for something I've written and it's wonderful and beautiful and everyone should go check it out! I'm not sure a tumblr link will work on Ao3 so I'm just gonna put the link here: czgaiaedition.tumblr.com/post/166104094422/hzd-scribbles-part-two-sketches-for-pieces-i

It's gorgeous <3 Thank you so much, CZGoldEdition, again!

All my love to burbear who edited this chapter the day before they left for vacation - you CHAMP. <3

Sobeck Journal, 12-09-41

A few days ago, when Aloy took off to assist one of her tribesmen (Resj? Reish?) I kept watching from a distance. I couldn't look away from my Focus' view, the signatures of life and machine dancing around each other down the hillside. And she took off, no hesitation.

It was a while before I realized the pounding I kept hearing was coming from inside me – my heart, if I can even call it that, beating faster and harder. I felt in my neck, fingers pressed where my carotid artery would be, and there it was. As if it never functioned any differently.

I've been afraid in this body before but I've never felt it more clearly. The drop of my stomach that went alongside it, 'sweat' beading on my skin as my core temperature elevated. It would have been fascinating if I wasn't praying to whatever god is still out there to keep her safe.

The machine she was fighting – I saw it afterwards – was big. Dangerous. And she was fine. Out of breath, dirt and grime everywhere, but fine. She and Nil (different tribe – Karja?) saved Resj. Not very thankful.

I should have broken his hand then and there. Saved us all the trouble.

There is nothing in my memories that comes close to how I felt watching him lean over Aloy, hands around her throat, throttling her. Yelling in her face. Not even when Ted fucked us all over, because that wasn't personal, that was global.

If this is how mothers feel about their children, I understand the 'momma bear' jokes, the references to felines and their young. How did my mother do it, all those years, whenever I got myself into trouble? How did she not fly into a rage?
Aloy inspects the leather in her hands, turning it around and feeling for weak spots. Bringing it closer to her face, she glances over its edge at the merchant, who gives her a stone-faced look in return.

“It's the finest I have and the finest you'll find this side of Daytower,” the Oseram merchant says with crossed arms, and Aloy can tell it isn’t a bluff. The leather is of exceptional quality.

She hands over the pelts and shards, rolling the leather to fit into her pouch and turning away when the merchant calls her back, grumbling something about redheads and machine hunters.

“Here,” the merchant says after rummaging through a few baskets, and gives her a small pile of items that look like junk at first glance, but are actually a bunch of different Oseram tools. “Don't use 'em anymore, and you look like the kind of someone who’d fit in at Free Heap.”

“Thanks,” Aloy says, a little bewildered.

She rejoins Elisabet at the campfire. With Teb's cloak wrapped around the woman's form, most of her is hidden away as just another traveler, but the people around here know Aloy. Some of them have been giving her inquisitive looks after spotting Elisabet's features behind the hood.

At least none of them have asked any questions so far.

“Get what you need?” Elisabet asks as soon as she sits down next to her, and she shows her the tools she's carrying, nudging her to take one before it falls off its brethren and onto the ground. Aloy watches Elisabet study the tool carefully, turning it over in her hands.

Setting the rest down by her feet so she can pack them away properly, she says, “Got these for free. They look useful.”

Some of the tools she recognized immediately, using them on her weapons herself, but others are foreign, strange contraptions made of wire and metal. One even seems to have a small container attached for blaze, judging by the stains.

Elisabet hums, handing the tool back. “They're well crafted,” she says. “From the ah... Carja?”

“Oseram,” Aloy corrects. “Their clothing is less ornate, more like armor.”

“It looks to me they're all wearing some kind of armor,” Elisabet mutters under her breath, shooting Aloy a quick look.

“Proper armor,” she says, a smile tugging on the edges of her mouth when she sees a spark of mischief in Elisabet's eyes. “And the leather Carja use in theirs is pretty sturdy,” she adds, “but when things are being thrown your way... Oseram make is best.”

“I'll take your word for it.”

Aloy puts away her newly acquired tool set in silence. Once she's done, Elisabet hands her a share of their rationed lunch.

After Sylens' sudden call, Aloy thought they'd jump into whatever mission came next straight away, but Elisabet hadn't even woken her up the next morning. Instead, she insisted on spending a few more days hunting and gathering supplies in the valley. Whenever Elisabet wasn't helping Aloy, she would find the woman practicing with her old bow, slowly improving her skill.
The only thing that was different was the absence of Elisabet's Focus. She only wore it at certain times, to either review or write down new information, or to convey short messages to GAIA.

Aloy didn't mention it then, and she isn't about to do so now. Whatever the reason, she's sure Elisabet knows what she's doing.

"Where'll we be going next?" she asks, pulling her piece of bread apart with her fingers, eating the smaller parts one by one.

Elisabet picks up one of the branches lying next to the fire, uses it to poke around in the hot ashes. "North," she says slowly. "To the Oseram settlement. Scrap..."

"Free Heap."

"Right. That's where we're headed."

Digging her fingers into another piece of bread, Aloy shakes her head. "I can't believe you made him agree to meet up," she says. "In person, I mean."

Elisabet doesn't ask her to clarify who she means. After all, Sylens has been on both their minds almost the entire time, even if Elisabet tries to hide it from her.

The woman gives her a weak smile. "For a man so hard to pin down, his motives are simple. Bait a bear long enough and he'll come out his hole. He wants knowledge... so I'll give him that knowledge, in Free Heap."

Aloy shakes her head again, stuffing more bread into one of her cheeks. "I don't know what a bear is but that sounds about right," she says, talking around the piece. "Do you trust him?"

Poking the fire, Elisabet scoffs. "Of course I don't." She frowns. "I thought you'd have bears by now."

In a split second decision, Aloy opens her Focus and asks, "GAIA, do we have any bears?"

The comforting buzz in her ear confirms GAIA's presence before she speaks. "Although my data on species reintegration is incomplete, my last known records show no instances of Ursidae rejoining the earth's population."

"I think that's a no," Aloy relays to Elisabet, who nods. She falls back to their earlier line of conversation by saying, "If you don't trust him, why see him at all?"

"He's cunning," Elisabet says. "Knows how to play his cards right, and he's aware of GAIA. Least we can do is take advantage of what he's discovered along the way."

Or he'll take advantage of them, trick them into somehow doing his bidding.

Aloy finishes her bread before dusting off her hands and clothes. "I don't like it," she says, rising to her feet. "See you back at the Striders?"

Elisabet nods, shrugging further into her cloak. "I'll be down in a bit."

---

Aloy strokes the flank of her ride, carefully taking note of any bumps in its metal armor. She just finished tying her equipment to its back, making sure the weight's balanced out properly. She knows Elisabet won't be long, but it's good to give the woman her space sometimes.
They're alike, that way.

Taking a moment to check in on Elisabet's Strider as well, Aloy almost misses the quiet footsteps to her left. She spins around, reaching for her spear before seeing the red feathers and relaxing.

“Anyone ever tell you sneaking up on someone could be dangerous?” she asks Nil.

The man tilts his head, coming to a halt next to her. “Yes,” he says. “I presume they mean for the other person.”

Knowing Nil, it's probably true.

Usually.

“Is this how the savior of Meridian spends her days?” Nil asks, reaching out with a hand to stroke along the Strider's mane. The machine stays calm under his touch and continues grazing. “Hunting small game, trading her wares?”

“Is stalking me how you spend yours?” Aloy throws back at him, but there isn't any real fire behind her words.

Nil blinks at her, the picture of innocence. “You disappeared from the camp,” he says. “Some would call it diligence on my part to follow through. There are all sorts of unsavory types out here.”

She huffs, trying and mostly succeeding in not rolling her eyes at his 'diligence'. “What do you want, Nil,” she says.

He makes a pleased sound, walking around her in a half circle. “Trouble seems to follow you closely,” he answers, and she chooses to see it as a compliment. “A man can get bored,” he says, looking up at her through his lashes, “a woman too, I presume.”

It isn't boredom that drives her to travel towards Dawn's Sentinel, but she doesn't bother correcting Nil. He would only argue against her point, claiming it to be some form of blood-lust.

It’s true there’s word of unrest in the north, bandits stirring in the dust. Still, this is Nil, a man who would rather fight than sneak around.

She's about to find a way to refuse his request when Elisabet comes down the muddy treads. The woman pauses in her stride, sharing a long look with Nil.

“Well, well,” she says, coming down the rest of the way at a slower pace. “We meet again.”

Nil bows his head in greeting. “It must be the will of the Sun,” he says, a sly smile splayed on his lips.

“Must be,” Elisabet repeats as she stands next to Aloy. “Too bad we're leaving.”

Taking her words as a cue, Aloy pulls herself up onto the Strider, settling down in the dip of its back.

“I offer you my blade in service,” Nil says. “The roads outward these lands are drenched in blood. Allow me to join you.”

“For as long as it benefits you,” Aloy adds quickly.

“Of course.” He looks up at her, and something seems to fall away – a part of his mask. “No man or woman should be forced to act in a way that doesn't benefit them.”
There's more to his words than that, and Aloy wonders if it has anything to do with his past, the parts of it he doesn't mention or allude to.

Elisabet's hand touches Aloy's ankle, stopping her as she about to say they'd rather travel alone.

“I think we need to discuss this,” Elisabet says, meeting Aloy's eyes and holding her gaze until she agrees with reluctance, giving a sharp nod. Only then does the woman turn her head towards Nil. “Excuse us for a moment.”

Without complaints, Nil bows out, walking deeper into the tall grass to give them some privacy.

Aloy's Strider shuffles on its legs and she strokes its neck, patting the side of it to calm the machine. “Do you want him to join us?” she asks Elisabet. “He admitted he'll go the other way if it suits him.”

Still tracking Nil's back with a thoughtful look, Elisabet hums softly. “How dangerous are these roads, Aloy?”

There's danger everywhere, whether it presents itself in human form or otherwise. The Embrace wasn't an exception, and neither is Hunter's Gathering, for all the defensive walls people put up to protect themselves.

Aloy sucks on her lower lip, pressing her teeth against the soft flesh hard enough to leave an imprint. “Nothing I can't handle,” she says, and the moment the words leave her mouth she knows it's the wrong answer.

Elisabet’s gaze is stern and almost chastising. It sends shivers down her spine because it reminds her so much of Rost. “He's coming with us.”

Her grip on the Strider's mane tightens as she grinds her teeth. “Why?” she asks even though she'd have more luck arguing with a rock. There's a whine in her voice she can't hide behind impatience. “Can't it be the two of us?”

“You know why,” Elisabet says, her eyes narrowing. “I don't want you going up against god knows what by yourself.”

Aloy wrinkles her nose, looking away from the woman, squinting as she faces the lowering sun. It's golden hour, the light soft and warm on everything it touches. “He challenged me once, said we should try to kill each other,” she says, deliberately leaving out the part where he refused to shoot her in the back when she declined.

“And you're both still here,” Elisabet says, not falling for her misdirection. “Seems to me he'd rather have your company alive than dead. A man like that can be useful.”

She wants to object, but can't find the words to do so.

There’s recognition in Elisabet’s eyes. “I've seen him fight alongside you,” she says in a more mellow tone. “After you disabled the machine. Those bandits, they were about to turn on you when he came out and... assisted you.”

Her throat feels dry all of a sudden as she remembers the event. She could've handled the situation by herself, she's sure, but Nil helping out had been a blessing at the time. “Thought you didn't approve of unnecessary bloodshed,” she says instead, gauging Elisabet's reaction.

“I don't,” the woman says, stroking the Strider's flank when the machine whirs. “Normally. But the world is different from when I was born.”
Was it that different, all those years ago? Surely they had taken care of plunderers and bandits in the Old Ones’ world, just as they do now. Is that why Faro Industries created the metal devils?

Elisabet taps the Strider’s side, stepping away from them. “You either adapt, or die, Aloy. That’s what I’ve learned.”

The way she says it leaves behind a hollowness Aloy can’t explain, as though there’s something she’s lost, which is strange. Of the two of them, Elisabet is the one who has lost everything. They watch Nil in silence, and the man turns his face towards them.

He already knows their decision.

---

The road is long, stretching out for miles ahead through the valleys, crossing over the hills in between. They stick to the well trodden path, the sandy line running through high grass and muddied planes where the machines have gathered all the resources they could from the earth.

Night is rapidly approaching, the moon shining down strong light onto the frozen mountaintops, the slopes glistening in between patches of undergrowth. At times they venture off-road, to avoid contact with the Grazers and Broadheads.

It’s quiet. Duller than a blade used to cut kindling.

Aloy huffs a breath up across her face, moving a small lock of hair that has fallen into her line of sight. With Nil riding next to them on Elisabet’s Strider, they’re stuck sharing Aloy’s ride.

Not that Aloy minds the close proximity. If anything, the past few days have shown her a way for them to live together, following their own rhythm. Not being together all the time, but still knowing the other was never far away. It had felt like... how things were, before the Proving.

She wanted more of that, just her and Elisabet against the world.

Aloy squints at Nil’s form, following him from the corners of her eyes. None of them have spoken much since their departure. Nil follows where she leads, usually only just behind her, or while they’re on broader paths like now, next to her.

The lower part of the valley, where the Thunderjaw patrols, is empty at first glance. Strange for a machine of habit to leave its routes, but as they trod along she discovers it hasn’t disappeared.

Elisabet shifts behind her, the hand holding on to her hip squeezing. “I haven’t seen one of those before,” the woman whispers.

Aloy swallows, ignoring the nervous jitters in her stomach riding past the fallen corpse of the Thunderjaw, resting half onto a plateau, its lower body sprawled awkwardly on the lower ground. As if it tried to climb out of the pit.

Trying to get away from something.

“HEPHAESTUS made these after being freed from GAIA,” Aloy says. “When the Derangement started.”

The Striders don’t seem bothered by the Thunderjaw, stepping around fallen scraps and debris when it's in their way, but Aloy can't help herself. She looks at the machine's head, its dead eyes, mandibles open in what might have been a final howl before it was struck.
Her heart beats heavy inside her chest.

The scratches on its plates, the gaping holes in its side. Of all the machines, even after all this time, the Thunderjaw is one that has earned her respect in every way. She tries to avoid them whenever she can, and fighting one isn’t something she particularly desires because they are fierce machines, but sometimes... she watches them from afar. How they protect the smaller machines from any danger.

They don’t act out of the same kind of bond an animal has for their youngsters, but it's a close thing. Always ready to strike and take the full force of an oncoming attack.

She can understand why HEPHAESTUS created them.

“I wouldn't want to be facing one of these,” Elisabet says. “Jaws look like they can deal some damage.”

Without thinking, Aloy snorts. “What you really have to watch out for are their Disc Launchers,” she says. “I don't see them here, but... those are deadly. Can take you out in a single blast.”

Elisabet is quiet for a while. Then she says, “I shouldn't be surprised, should I? You've taken one of these down before.”

She nods and hopes no one ever tells Elisabet about the time she hunted down Redmaw and slew the beast with Talanah.

There's nothing more to say as they continue their journey, leaving the fallen Thunderjaw behind to be taken apart by Scrappers and Glinthawks as soon as they find its corpse. It’s a burial that will form new life inside one of HEPHAESTUS’ Cauldrons, materials reused to shape another being.

A new machine, a new world… to see death and suffering and turn it into something to hope for, to look forward to. Is that what kept Elisabet going? She tries again to imagine herself as Elisabet, faced with an enemy she could never fight and overcome, and Aloy’s own fights seem small in comparison.

The globe, the one that belonged to Elisabet, is a heavy weight in Aloy’s pouch. She hasn’t shown it to the woman yet, and isn’t sure if she should give it back, but she couldn’t leave it behind either. It’s still a reminder of everything that has happened to her and to the Old Ones, a reminder of what she’s been through and why.

It’s a reminder for why they’re headed north right now.

Because there is no other choice.

Riding to Dawn’s Sentinel means leaving the Sacred Land even further behind. In a way, it reminds her of that very first journey, the one that led her to Meridian and beyond. Back then it was to seek revenge, to find Olin and put a stop to Helis and the Shadow Carja.

Aloy shivers in the nighttime air, and Elisabet folds the sides of her cloak over Aloy’s arms, effectively wrapping it around her like a blanket. Already warmed by Elisabet’s body, Aloy clutches the edges together in her free hand, keeping them in place.

“Thanks,” she whispers.

She can feel Elisabet resting her forehead against the dip between Aloy’s shoulders – a position they’ve practiced a few times before when riding together, to allow one of them to get some form of
rest – and Aloy straightens her back, keeping herself a steady post to lean on.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

So first off, I really wanna recommend anyone who enjoys reading my fic some fics that I think you guys might like as well?

My sweetest and dearest thoroneaquila wrote Of breaking and reforging, a wonderful fic written as a letter Avad writes to Aloy, detailing his own history and youth, growing up under Jiran's rule. Absolutely heartbreaking! I'm considering basically all of it as the headcanon backstory for Avad in this fic as well.

AND OF COURSE, HOW CAN I NOT MENTION Identity BY CZGoldEdition?? Although not yet a finished work I already love this fic so much, how can I not share it? A wonderful, beautiful fic that explores GAIA's creation and her bond with Elisabet - AND SAMINA IS THERE, TOO? <3

Alright, enough of my yelling. :'D please go read them if it sounds like it'll be your cuppa.

Having been away for a few days I expected burbear to take it easy and do the next chapter later tonight... but then they just, fricking, read the chapter YESTERDAY. <3 You're amazing, pal! Thank you so much for helping me out.

Petra and Elisabet get along like a Snapmaw to water.

It's frightening.

There was hardly any time for Aloy to introduce the two to each other before Elisabet stepped further into Petra's workshop and started pointing things out, asking questions that sparked a light in the inventor's eyes.

As though a small mercy granted Aloy by the All-Mother herself, Nil decided to stay outside of Free Heap, setting up his own camp on the other side of the river. He said something about being first to know if anyone attempts to attack the settlement. Not having encountered any bandits on the way must've disappointed him.

“One of my men thought of this,” Petra is saying, moving several seemingly unfinished projects out of the way on her workbench. Her arms glisten, a mix of oils and sweat covering her skin. She had been working on the forge when they arrived, but dropped everything to talk to them.

Placing a large piece of metal and coils on the wooden tabletop, Petra turns over her shoulder. “C'mere, Flame-hair. You'll want to see this too.”

It doesn't look like a weapon, but still, Aloy pushes herself off the fence she was sitting on, and Elisabet takes a step to the side to make way for her. Together, they watch as Petra attaches a blaze cylinder to the metal box.

Nothing happens.
Aloy waits a little longer, pushing her hands against her hips, shifting weight from one foot to the other. “Is it broken?” she asks, but then Elisabet hums, stroking the back of her hand against Aloy's arm.

“Look,” she says softly, pointing out one of the coils.

It's... turning orange, becoming so bright it's at an almost painful intensity.

Petra grins, crossing her arms across her chest. “She gets it,” she says, giving Aloy a wink. “No wonder you like the stuff.”

Inspecting the inside of the box a little closer Aloy sees the coils running along the top and bottom, with a little space left in between. The orange is spreading along the coils, and she can feel the heat blasting off of them onto her skin. She finds herself blinking rapidly and takes a step back, the warmth drying her eyes out.

“The canister acts as a power source,” Elisabet says, leaning towards her. “I can't see how it works precisely... would have to dismantle it, but...”

Aloy turns on her Focus, scanning the box. All different kinds of parts are inside, but nothing she can make sense of. “Maybe you should scan it,” she says.

Elisabet makes a sound that doesn't really say anything, just something that tells Aloy she's been heard.

Petra suddenly comes between them, holding a metal clamp and a bowl filled with food. Her midday meal, it seems. “If you thought this thing was built just for heatin', you'd be wrong,” she says, taking a piece of fruit and cutting a slice from it. Then she grips it tight in between the clamp's parts before sticking it inside the box.

It takes a little fiddling with the clamp until it seems to snap into place, and Petra steps back. “Isn't that neat?” she says.

While Elisabet nods, Aloy finds it hard to believe this is an incredible new invention. She leans back in, resting her hands on the table, feeling the heat spread on the top of her cheeks, the bridge of her nose. The fruit is fragrant, giving the air a hint of sweetness among the scents of metal and smoke and sweat.

“You're drying it,” she says, her eyebrows knitting together. “Slowly.”

Petra wipes the back of her hand across her forehead, leaving behind a dull stripe among gleaming skin. “It can be used anywhere, inside or out. All you need is a can of blaze.”

Aloy scoffs, stepping back again and spreading her arms. “Or,” she says, tilting her head to the side, “you can use the sun, and then you don't need any blaze.”

“Aloy...” It isn't so much a warning in Elisabet's voice as it is a soft reproach, but Petra laughs, tapping Elisabet's shoulder with a gloved hand.

“She's allowed her skepticism,” Petra says. “Such is the way of the Nora.”

Although there's no malice behind the words, they leave a bitter taste at the back of Aloy's throat, making any retort she can think of sharp and pointed. She stays her tongue, shaking her head instead.

“I'm going to buy some things,” she says, moving towards the stairs leading down into Free Heap's
town center. “Useful things.”

Petra waves her approval, while Elisabet stays where she stands, saying, “I'll wait here.”

---

She takes longer running her errands than strictly necessary, even stepping out of town bounds to talk to Kaeluf and Beladga, who are preparing to go on a hunt. She helps them pack up their supplies and is even offered a spot on their hunt, but she refuses. A hunt like this can take days, even weeks, and she wants to be there when Sylens arrives.

The thought of Elisabet being alone with Sylens brings an ill feeling with it, a cramp that slowly spreads from Aloy's stomach outward. No, she has to be there.

Still, after buying whatever parts she was looking for, she finds Jorgriz in town and spends some time talking with him as he guards the main road leading to Free Heap. Jorgriz thanks her again for helping him and Beladga get together...

“She's just so amazing, you know?” he tells her as they watch the hunters leave. “She really knows how to brighten my forge. I don't know how we would've figured things out without you.”

Aloy scuffs her feet in the dry dust. “I'm sure you would've managed,” she says, leaving out the eventually she tags along the sentence mentally. Having to deal with them while trying to get those Behemoth cables wasn't one of the easiest things she's ever done.

Good thing Petra doesn't let them go on hunts by themselves anymore.

She stretches out her back before picking up the small bundle of parts she wrapped in cloth. “I should go,” she says.

Jorgriz holds onto the spear he carries with both hands, leaning most of his weight on it. “You and your mother are staying with Petra, right?”

Clearly, nothing that happens in Free Heap can stay quiet for long. Seeing no point in denying something everyone already knows, Aloy nods. “Why?”

The shrug of his shoulders and lopsided smile doesn't tell her much, and neither does his cheerful, “It's good to have you back, is all. Adds some heat to the coals.”

Aloy presses her lips together, squinting when the high sun shines in her eyes. “Sure does,” she says before giving him a final wave and leaving.

She'd planned on going back to them now, but she no longer feels ready. Not quite yet. Instead, she finds someone working with a mechanical hammer and watches them for a while until they offer to explain what they're doing.

It's interesting, not something she's ever studied closely. The water in the stream rotates the wooden wheel, which in turn moves the hammer. It's efficient, the Oseram worker says, showing her how the hammer can pound on heated metal steadily without someone having to lift its weight.

They explain some more, but all Aloy can really think of is the ugly hand reaching inside her as she imagines Petra showing Elisabet new inventions. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders. Leaning in close enough to – anything.

“... and that's how production rates have gotten much higher since then!” the Oseram worker
exclaims, pointing a proud hand at the hammer.

Aloy swallows around her dry mouth, relaxing her jaw. “Thanks,” she says, barely registering the anytime! from the worker before walking away, moving towards Petra's workplace.

---

She finds them standing over Petra's worktable, Elisabet holding a small tool with a red-hot glowing tip in one hand, a silver wire in the other. In front of her is a device with its wiring exposed, two loose ends wrapped around each other. Holding the tool to the underside of the wires, Elisabet runs the wire along the top, its silver material melting into the loose ends.

Petra herself is concentrating on the invention she showed them earlier, but the women speak in hushed tones, unaware of Aloy's presence.

“... so with the rack, whatever excess there is will drip onto the coils,” Elisabet's saying, and now Aloy can see Petra is holding a metal rack, one that seems to fit into the box. She can't hear Petra's reply, but Elisabet laughs, the sound of it warm and easy, shaking her head as she places the tool and wire to the side.

The hand is back, wrapping around Aloy's chest, hot and heavy.

She walks towards them, making sure her feet hit the ground a little harder than necessary. “Found what I was looking for,” she says, dropping the bundle of parts onto the ground next to the table.

Remnants from the amusement Petra's words brought are still visible on Elisabet's face when she turns to Aloy. “Good,” she says, the wrinkles around her eyes deeper than normal. “Petra was just making some improvements on the drying machine.”

“Ones your mother suggested, Flame-hair,” Petra adds as she places the rack into the box, reconnecting the blaze to it again. “You never said she might as well be part Oseram.”

Elisabet chuckles. “I'm not part anything,” she says.

“If you say so,” Petra replies, mirthful eyes lingering on the back of Elisabet's head.

It's not a joke, so why are they acting like it is?

Aloy tries to ignore the heat just above her neck, coming to stand next to Elisabet. “When will Sylens be here?” she asks, knowing fully well she won't be able to receive a satisfying answer beyond what Elisabet told her the past times she asked.

“He'll arrive sometime around sundown,” Elisabet says. “Maybe later. That's all he mentioned to me.”

The idea of having to sit around and do nothing until then while Elisabet and Petra work on devices together makes Aloy chew on the inside of her lower lip.

“If you're going to be doing nothing until then, I could use the extra hands,” Petra says, and for a moment Aloy expects her to turn to Elisabet only – but she doesn't, keeping her eyes on Aloy. “There's some materials I need from the scrapyard, but I don't have time to go get them myself.”

Aloy nods. “Tell me what you need exactly and I'll find it for you,” she says.

While Petra takes note of her inventory, Elisabet rises from the stool she was sitting on, slipping off
the leather apron that clearly belongs to Petra and laying it down on the stool, folded in half. “I'll join
you,” Elisabet says. “If you don't mind, that is.”

Aloy feels a pang of shame when she's surprised by Elisabet's offer, having set her mind on Elisabet
wanting to stay with Petra to do more tinkering. “Sure,” she says, her voice smaller than she'd like,
and she has to look away, studying the lines in the stone flooring.

---

The Striders take them past the collapsed bridge to the entrance of the scrapyard, where Elisabet and
Aloy dismount and set them free to do whatever they want for the time being. A quick scan of Aloy's
Focus reveals very little machine activity in the area, and without any further wait they step inside the
metal wasteland littered with rust and wooden Oseram structures.

“It's a junkyard,” Elisabet muses, running her hand along some of the orange hulls, piled atop each
other. “The way we used to have them... with old cars and machines.”

Aloy opens her Focus, taking another look at the list of parts Petra wants from them. Specific
materials, ones that are easily indicated by the Focus. She still isn't able to 'taste the five different
metals' in the air the way Petra says the Oseram can.

Without checking to see if Elisabet is following, she climbs one of the larger pieces of wreckage
surrounded by Oseram walkways, using her spear to loosen bits and pieces until the right part breaks
free from what was once perhaps part of a building, like a Cauldron.

She kicks the part over the edge, hearing it land with a dull thump in the sand below, but it’s
followed by a curse from Elisabet, and when Aloy walks up to the edge she can see the woman,
mere feet away from where the part fell.

“Look out where you're throwing those things, alright?” Elisabet says, loud enough to reach Aloy's
ears clearly.

Other than a quick, “Sorry,” Aloy doesn't pay her much mind, instead flicking on her Focus to find
the next material. As long as she keeps moving, maybe time will go by faster and Sylens' arrival will
happen sooner.

Her impatience is rewarded with a jagged edge of the second part she finds catching on the side of
her palm and scratching a long line across the skin. She manages to pull the part out before a sharp
sting makes her hiss, prompting her to quickly drop the chunk down below.

Red beads well up along the scratch, which is deep enough to show an edge of skin on both sides of
it, pulling away from the wound. It'll heal on its own, and isn't the hand she uses to draw her bow,
but it's a hindrance that could've been avoided.

“Are you careful up there?”

Aloy looks down and finds herself meeting Elisabet's eyes. She closes her hand in a fist, pulling it
close to her body, but the shift in Elisabet's brows reveals the woman has already seen the blood
dripping down the sides.

“Get down here,” Elisabet says, and although her tone doesn't even come close to the one she used
with Resh or Sylens, it makes Aloy's muscles tense, her breath quicken.

She doesn't have to obey. Besides, she's taken care of scrapes like this before, it can wait a little
longer.
Her Focus shows another part not too far along the heap, and lying relatively on top of everything, as well. Digging her nails into her palm makes the pain worse, but it helps push a refusal past her lips. “I'll get the next one first,” she says. “We'll be ready to leave in –”

“No, you get down from there right now,” Elisabet says, and there's that ice, that coldness that makes Aloy feel frozen in place.

At the same time the heat and sharpness of her tongue from earlier floods her mouth, makes her jaw clench shut. “And what if I don't?” she forces out. “Are you going to command me?”

“Aloy.”

“You're not my leader,” Aloy yells, and the regret that follows is instant. Her legs are stuck in place while Elisabet takes big strides forward, climbing on top the pile of scrap and woodwork like it's nothing. Part of her wants to run, her heart beating hard enough to pulse in her ears.

Holding out a hand, Elisabet stops just in front of her. “One way or another,” she says, “you're coming back down with me.”

You can't make me, lies on the tip of her tongue, and she shakes her head –

Turns out Elisabet can actually force her with a single hand clamped around Aloy's upper arm, the hold tight enough to hurt. Elisabet uses her grip to pull Aloy along back down, going slow enough so neither of them will stumble or risk further injury, but there's no chance of escaping.

“You don't get to walk around with a wound like that,” Elisabet's saying. “Not in a fucking junkyard. While infections and tetanus don't seem to concern you, they sure as fuck concern me.”

Even without knowing what tetanus is, Aloy's cheeks are burning, the back of her eyes and nose stinging fiercely when Elisabet pushes her down to sit on a crate in the shade of one of the tunnel-like pieces, left by the Oseram workers no doubt.

Elisabet makes her hold out her hand as the woman flushes the cut with water. The pain intensifies, like the sharp edge of a blade, but that's nothing compared to the burning that comes next when Elisabet takes a small lidded jar from her pouch and spreads the opaque paste kept inside along the wound.

Her hand still being held in place by Elisabet, Aloy leans forward, folding in on herself, and bites down on her cheek until she can taste iron. There's a whine in her throat she cuts short by drawing a breath deep into her lungs, but she can't stop the tears that flow from her waterlines.

“I'm sorry,” she hears Elisabet say. There's some more rustling inside the pouch before a bandage is wrapped around her palm, tight enough to dull the pain. Then Elisabet rubs a hand up and down Aloy's arm.

It's distracting enough from the wound, but the kindness of the gesture confuses her. Wasn't she angry because Aloy defied her?

The tears keep on coming, even as Elisabet gently moves the arm back against Aloy's chest and steps forward, giving Aloy the option to lean on her. She does, pressing her face to Elisabet's stomach, and sobs when she feels a hand drop down to the nape of her neck, pulling her closer.

Elisabet's other arm folds around Aloy's shoulders. “Talk to me, sweetheart,” Elisabet says, the words murmured softly, and they only make Aloy ache more.
“Y – you should stay,” she finally manages. “With Petra. You like it here, you should stay.”

The hand holding her nape squeezes for a second, thumb rubbing over supple skin. “What are you on about?”

“After Sylens comes,” Aloy says. “You don't have to follow me, you can stay here and...” Her words fades away into a whisper as her throat closes in on itself again, her shoulders shaking. Be happy, she wants to say. Be with your people.

The Oseram seem to fit Elisabet, more than the Nora with their stifling beliefs, more than the life of an outcast. She can't force Elisabet to join her on a quest like this. It's Aloy's purpose, what GAIA made her for, and it's unfair to drag Elisabet along any longer.

“You've already done so much,” Aloy manages to force out before the tears swallow her voice again, and she braces herself, knowing it's for the best when Elisabet agrees with her.

The moment seems to rest on both of them, and when Aloy can't take it anymore, the waiting, and she's about to ask Elisabet to just admit you want to stay here, the arms around her pull her in against Elisabet's body even more.

“Silly girl.”

Elisabet places both hands on Aloy's shoulders, to push her away so she can kneel down, coming face to face with her. “You silly, silly girl,” she repeats, and Aloy frowns, not sure if she should be hurt by what she's saying before the woman continues. “I'm not going anywhere.”

“But you don't have to. I'm... It's my... you said I'm not yours, so you're not mine either, it's not fair to expect you to –”

Elisabet cuts her off, the hands on her shoulders pressing down. “I said you weren't one of my people,” she says, and Aloy nods. “I'm not your boss, or master, or however you want to call it.”

“That's what I said,” Aloy tries to tell her, but Elisabet shakes her head.

“Listen.” One of her hands rising up to cup Aloy's jaw, hushing her when she attempts to explain herself one last time. “Listen, Aloy. We're family. You don't own family. You are not one of my workers.”

Everything slows, the world narrowing until it's just Elisabet and her. “Family?” Her voice breaks, and she feels out of breath. This isn't the rejection she was counting on.

“Yes, sweetheart,” Elisabet says, wiping away the last of Aloy's tears. “I'm not going to leave you. We're in this together, alright?”

She really should have waited with drying Aloy's cheeks, because the moment Elisabet stops speaking, Aloy's waterlines are brimming once more.

“Is that what you were so afraid of?” Elisabet asks, and Aloy finds herself nodding, mute with emotion.

Elisabet embraces her, and Aloy takes a deep breath, dipping her head forward into the crook of her neck. The darkness she finds there soothes her as much as the warmth coming off Elisabet's body.

“Petra... is a smart person. Seems like a good leader,” Elisabet says. “I like her, she's got style, but none of that matters because you're my first and foremost priority.”
Holding on to Elisabet's back with her good hand, Aloy whispers her thanks against the fabric of Elisabet's garb. In response, Elisabet's head turns towards her and she feels a light pressure against her temple.

“No more worrying all by yourself, okay?” Elisabet pulls back when Aloy lets go. “If something's bothering you, you come to me and we'll figure it out together. We good?”

Aloy's laugh turns into a cough, and she dries her eyes with her good hand. “We're good,” she says with a smile that twitches at the edges.

“Good girl,” Elisabet says before rising, brushing a hand over Aloy's shoulder. It takes longer than normal for the words to remind her of Rost, and for some reason, they don't make her feel as bad as usual. Instead, they feel the way they are meant to – as praise.

She's about to pick up her spear, turning on her Focus to find the last parts on Petra's list, when stumbling footsteps alert her to a machine's presence. Quickly scanning her surroundings, she finds a Scrapper, about to round the corner on them, and her heart rate picks up.

Elisabet doesn't seem aware of anything – because she isn't wearing a Focus – and she won't be able to reach her in time. “Watch out,” she says, as loud as she dares while grabbing her spear with both hands, ignoring the pain for now.

The Scrapper emerges from behind a pile of rubble, looking dead ahead at Elisabet, its eyes shifting to yellow. It's injured, missing its radar, and one of its legs is dragging behind it, exposed wiring giving off sparks.

Aloy is about to push herself into a jog, to catch up to Elisabet and override or kill the Scrapper – but Elisabet makes a motion for her to stay back.

“I've got this,” Elisabet says, and just as the Scrapper growls and Aloy’s heart jumps to her throat, a blue light appears, coming from Elisabet's body.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

I have a very busy week ahead of me but here's the update! I'm currently all dressed up while the living room is filled with friends here for a murder mystery/halloween party and it's my birthday this week too, so I might take a two week break sometime in November (especially with the DLC coming out as well) but I've written up to chapter 27 at this point, so who knows. :) Just thought I'd let you guys know there's a possibility I'll take a small (teeny tiny) break after the next chapter.

As always, so much love for burbear for beta reading and helping out whenever I run into trouble. You truly are a bat-tastic blessing. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CONTENT WARNING: this chapter contains behavior that can be viewed as self harm (causing pain to one's self on purpose).

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Through the Focus' view, the light is a powerful wave that reminds Aloy of the light that Tallnecks emit after she overrides them. The light washes over the Scrapper, and when it vanishes, the machine shakes its head, eyes blue once more.

Her heart is still pounding, but the machine seems docile, even in its wounded state.

“There, there,” Elisabet coos, and the Scrapper makes its way over to her, lying down by her feet.

Aloy watches from a distance as Elisabet touches the injured leg, inspecting it. She reaches for a spot behind the hip joint, and the Scrapper lets her. There's a click, and then the sparks stop coming off the exposed wires.

“What are you doing?” Aloy asks, slowly putting away her spear. The cut on her palm is aching again, letting her know it was a bad idea to wield her spear like that.

Opening her other pouch, Elisabet takes out some tools Aloy recognizes, having gotten them from the merchant in Hunter's Gathering. “Gonna solder these wires, fix up the leg,” she says, showing Aloy she's carrying the silver wire from earlier.

An injured machine never stays overridden for long, and fixing it seems like a waste of time. “Why?” Aloy asks, stepping in closer. The scratches and marks on the Scrapper's body look like the ones they saw on the Thunderjaw, in the valley. “It'll turn on you the moment you're done with it.”

Elisabet moves some of the Scrapper's protective plates to the side, exposing more of the underlying mesh of wires and parts. “They haven't so far,” she says.

The Scrapper lets her do anything to it, almost as if it understands she's helping out. Aloy frowns, looking at the four blue lights of one of its eyes, automatically following the shape of its head down
to the grinding parts of its jaw.

They don't act like this when she overrides them.

“What did you do to it?”

Elisabet's hands stop for a moment. “GAIA gave me a... present,” she says. “A way to imprint on them, or... have them imprint on me. You should ask her. I'm sure she's willing to explain in detail.”

Aloy watches as Elisabet measures different wires and cuts off some of their housing, twirling the metal ends together. Her Focus still shows the list of parts, and being out in the open is beginning to feel uncomfortable.

“I'll do that,” she says. “And I'll... get the parts.”

Elisabet doesn't look up from her work, but as Aloy starts to walk away, she says, “Be careful, alright?” and it makes the weight in Aloy's chest a little lighter.

---

GAIA says it's a better working version of Aloy's override, but one that requires a synthetic host to function.

Using the spear as leverage, Aloy wedges out the final piece on Petra's list from the metal hill. She kicks the part, making it skid its ways down the rubble. “You mean, Elisabet's body?”

“Yes,” GAIA says. “For it to function under your command, a lot of pathways would need to be reworked. This is beyond my current capabilities.”

She wipes a hand over her forehead, rubbing away sweat. “Got it.”

There's a voice in her head, wondering softly if Elisabet's body is able to override machines like a Corruptor – if there's some part inside her that makes it possible.

But if it's a part, GAIA can recreate it, the voice says in a way that reminds Aloy of Sylens, and she can almost see the tightness in his lips in her mind's eye as he ponders...

All-Mother forbid.

Aloy gathers the materials quickly, her hands shaking as she places them into a cloth for carrying. Sylens can't find out what Elisabet truly is. She doesn't know the man well enough to predict his reaction with accuracy, but he's willing to do mad things to gain knowledge.

By the time she's back where she left Elisabet and the Scraper, she finds the machine half on top of Elisabet, the woman lying on her back in the sand. Fear reaches out and settles in Aloy's body, but one of Elisabet's hands is petting the armor-covered side of the machine.

The woman is laughing.

As Aloy approaches the Scraper looks up, scanning her with its blue eyes.

“That's Aloy,” Elisabet says, pushing herself up on her elbows. She touches the Scraper's jaw, fingers gliding over the parts it uses for grinding metal. “You can trust her.”

Those eyes stay on her long enough to make her hands itch for the weight of her spear. Then the
machine whirs, almost like a sigh, before nuzzling its forehead against Elisabet's chest.

While Elisabet returns to petting the machine, Aloy looks away, seeking out GAIA on her Focus. “Is this normal?” she asks in a murmur, confident her words will reach the AI while trying not to alert Elisabet of her unease.

“The Scrapper is acting within given parameters,” GAIA answers, but then there's a pause, one that Aloy can hear because GAIA maintains contact, the soft buzzing on the background uninterrupted. “However, its behavior is not encouraged by protocol.”

Aloy takes a step back, removing herself somewhat from the scene before her. “Because of HEPHAESTUS?” she asks, lowering her voice even further. She already knows she's right, having collected enough data from the Tallnecks and the Cauldrons to form a picture of HEPHAESTUS, alone and troubled without GAIA's guidance, trying to find ways to keep its creations safe.

“Yes,” GAIA says.

There's something Aloy hasn't asked, something she's wanted to talk about with the AI but never felt it was the right time and place. She glances at Elisabet and the Scrapper, who are still entangled on the ground, before taking the split decision to round the corner on one of the piles of rubble, putting some distance between them.

Even now, it's hard to come up with the words.

“You can tell me anything, Aloy,” GAIA says, prompting her. There's no worry in her voice, only warmth. The same tone she's used to give Aloy a sense of comfort.

“Why didn't you explain about the sub-functions? How you're not in control of them, even though I helped you find those overrides?”

Having finally said what's been on her mind hurts the way a wound aches after ripping off a scab, and she doesn't want it to. GAIA has given her so much, has helped her when no one else could, but at the same time there's a sense of betrayal that seems at odds with how she's come to feel about the AI.

“I did not mean to distress you,” GAIA says. “However, I miscalculated and I apologize. By not placing my trust in you I have harmed our relationship.”

Aloy hisses as the dull pain in her hand intensifies, and relaxes her curled up fists. With pain comes a clarity of sorts, a distance from the feelings in her head, and she's about to press her thumb against the bandaged cut when GAIA's buzz comes back online.

“Please do not hurt yourself, Aloy.”

“I'm not – ” she tries to say, but lets her hands fall to her sides. “Is this why you and Elisabet no longer... speak to each other? The overrides, I mean,” she says, trying to lead the conversation away from herself. GAIA is sorry and that should be enough, there's no reason to linger on it.

“Elisabet and I have had a temporary 'falling out', I believe is the right term,” GAIA says. “The fault herein lies with me. In due time, we will continue our previous manner of correspondence, albeit with more honesty.”

The relief lifting her spirits comes with the realization of how much she's come to depend on GAIA and Elisabet as a constant, and as quick as the relief came it vanishes.
Dependence isn't good. It'll make her worried and sloppy.

At least after Rost's death, there was no one to hold her back in her actions, to bring doubt to mind whenever she jumped down a chasm and bounded her way into a fight. Would she have been able to do the things that needed to be done if he'd still been alive?

Guilt grows just beneath her heart for ever thinking this way. Somehow the thought of being replaced makes its way into her head as well, a quick reminder of Elisabet's strength and how smart she is. How she and GAIA could probably do everything without her...

Stop it.

Pain grounds her, brings her back to herself, and GAIA's voice takes a tone as close to panicked as Aloy has ever heard her. She takes a quick breath, releasing her bandaged hand and shaking it out.

“Sorry,” she says. “I'm okay, GAIA. I won't do it again.”

Instead of an actual reply there's a silent sense of... approval? Judgment? It's hard to tell, but then GAIA is back, saying, “Elisabet approaches.”

Not a moment later the woman appears, the Scrapper following her closely. “There you are,” she says in an airy manner, but there's a tightness just below her voice that belies something else. “I was thinking we should head back. We've been out here long enough.”

Aloy swallows out of compulsion, her throat and mouth dry like dust. “We should,” she agrees, pushing away from the wall of rubble she was leaning on.

“You're looking a bit flushed.”

With a shrug, Aloy moves past her, setting foot for the Striders. “It's just the heat,” she calls over her shoulder.

---

Petra dabs a glob of ointment onto Aloy's nose, followed by her cheeks, spreading it out with the tips of her fingers. “Thought you'd know to stick to the shadows by now, Flame-hair,” the woman says, her amusement palpable. “Got yourself a nice forge glow.”

As soon as they arrived back at Free Heap, Petra had taken one look at Aloy's face and called them into her hut, offering them both a drink of water before setting Aloy down on some pelts and grabbing a well-worn pot from one of her shelves.

Her cheeks are hot, glowing from the inside out, and the ointment cools the skin immediately, drawing some of the heat into the substance.

Aloy shrugs helplessly, failing to suppress a smile. “It'll pass,” she says, leaning forward and keeping her head still to allow Petra better access. “It's only skin.”

“It's only skin,” Petra repeats, cooing. “Aren't you the most precious cog under the sun.”

Sunburn never bothers her for long, the level of discomfort low compared to the straining of muscles after overuse or landing badly during a fight.

Aloy looks past Petra's shoulder to meet Elisabet's eyes, the woman herself seated on the other end of the room. The Scrapper is lying by her feet, its head laid on its front legs. Not asleep, but resting – a
strange sight to behold.

Their arrival sparked some commotion, with the Scrappers refusing to stay outside Free Heap's boundaries with the Striders. Instead, the machine trod steadily next to Elisabet, pushing its head under her hand at times, ignoring the shouts from people and Elisabet's quick assurances.

It's been a long time since the Scrappers started attacking people.

“Should've kept a closer eye,” Elisabet says, bringing Aloy back from her thoughts just as Petra smears some ointment on her face.

Aloy frowns before she can stop herself. She wants to object, but Petra beats her to it by laughing.

“Seems like you had to keep a lookout for something else as well,” the inventor says, keeping her focus on Aloy's face. “Does taming machines come naturally to you both?”

“I guess you could call it a family trait.” The soft smile spreading on Elisabet's lips brings warmth to Aloy's chest as their eyes meet again. It's meant for her, and only her, a fact that doesn't escape Aloy when Petra turns around and a mask of neutrality slips onto Elisabet's face.

Petra walks back to her shelves, shaking her head. “Maybe I was wrong and there's Banuk in there, somewhere.” She returns the pot to its original spot, and upon facing the room again she winks at Elisabet, saying, “Next you'll be trying to tame some people.”

“Now there's a thought,” Elisabet replies with a raised eyebrow, the makings of a smirk tugging the corner of her lips upward.

Why does it feel like Aloy is missing context here?

“I got you the parts,” she says instead, kicking her foot against the cloth bundle on the ground.

It distracts Petra from whatever moment she and Elisabet were having, and the inventor comes back over, ruffling the top of Aloy's head before scooping down to grab the materials. “Come find me later, Flame-hair,” she says, stopping at the door. “I'll show you how these fit into my next dispute settler.”

They wait.

As soon as the sun starts to set, Elisabet takes out her Focus and clips it back in place, although there's nothing being communicated between her and GAIA.

After the guards change their shift, Elisabet joins Aloy at the top of the town's wall. The plains are quiet, a soft breeze moving the underbrush, machines grazing in the distance, further than usual. The Stormbird is nowhere in sight.

Elisabet sits down on the edge next to her. “You won't spot him like this.”

Drumming her fingers against the wooden flooring, Aloy shrugs, keeping her gaze far, far out. “He's always late.” She doesn't mean for the words to come out bitter, but they do, just a little bit, for all the times she sat and waited, staring at whatever was in front of her until her eyes burned.

“You've got better things to do,” Elisabet says. “Like taking a nap on that bed Petra promised us. It's very comfortable. I might even prefer it to our bedrolls.”
“He could arrive at any time now, you’ve said so yourself.”

Elisabet rises. “Is that man your lover?” she asks. “Did you promise him you’d stand watch here?”

Without warning Sylens' face comes to mind, much closer to her own than has ever happened in reality. “No,” Aloy sputters.

“What's stopping you then?” Elisabet holds her hand out for Aloy to grab and pull herself up with, and Aloy does, painfully aware of her still heating cheeks even though the sunburn will hide their coloring.

The bed Petra has offered them is in a small side room of her hut and fills the space almost to its entirety. The possibility of it being Petra's own bed is high, although the inventor is nowhere in sight. Who is awaiting them there is the Scrapper, lying on the foot of the mattress, glowing blue eyes tracking their figures in the dark.

Elisabet sets a small oil lamp next to the bed and invites Aloy to join her on the mattress and furs. There is more than enough space for the both of them, and Aloy settles down on her side after removing her boots and armor. She watches Elisabet in the soft orange light of the lamp as she loosens the straps of Aloy's old arm bracers.

Drawing her knees close and holding on to them, Aloy asks, “What if someone is your mate, or lover?”

Elisabet places the bracers onto the pile of her other things before joining Aloy, lying down on her back, hands resting on her stomach. “Not even then,” she says. “If a person loves you... truly loves you, they'll understand that you are your own person, with your own life and you're not a puppet who will wait around for them to show up and...” Her brows furrow as she waves a hand towards the ceiling in a circular motion. “Rock your world, or some other bullshit like that.”

“Sylens will be annoyed.”

“Let him be,” Elisabet says, turning her head to face Aloy. “From what I've seen, he's an annoying dickhole himself. I'm sure he'll reach out somehow to tell us how long he's had to travel, only for us to be taking a very comfortable nap when he arrived.”

“Dickhole,” Aloy repeats, the word strangely satisfying to say. A smile spreads on her lips. “Sylens is a dickhole.”

Elisabet watches her with wide eyes, then casts her gaze up to the ceiling before covering them with her hand, muttering, “Good lord in heaven, forgive me for what I've done.” She uncovers one eye by splitting the fingers apart to give Aloy a look. “That's a bad word, Aloy. That's a very bad word,” she says, but the deepened wrinkles visible around her eye tell a different story.

“What does it mean?”

By now Elisabet's shoulders tremble and she's using both hands to cover her face, shaking her head. “No. No! I'm not going to tell you!” she says. “You're a smart girl, you can figure it out yourself.”

“What about fuck, then? You use that one a lot.”

Rolling away from Aloy, Elisabet moans, mumbling something that sounds like, “Mom always said it was gonna bite me in the ass one day.”

“I know that word,” Aloy says, grinning, and Elisabet rolls towards her, her hands back on her
stomach.

She seems to study Aloy's face before laughing once, turning her head to face the ceiling again.

“Alright. You've convinced me.

“The word fuck is a very good bad word. You can use it in almost any situation. When something good happens, it can be fucking good. When something bad happens...”

“ Fucking bad?”

“That's right. So when we go out to meet with Sylens later and it turns out it was a trap all along, a way to get us out in the open, what are we?”

After thinking on it for a moment, Aloy says, “Fucking angry?”

Elisabet nods. “Or, and here's where the versatility of the word comes into play, we're fucked, because Sylens fucked us over. In this situation, what would you call Sylens?”

“A fucking dickhole.”

Snickering, Elisabet rubs the back of her hand across her forehead. “You're a little too good at this already,” she says. “I'm gonna conclude our impromptu lesson on profanity there.”

Aloy tries to convince her to share more information, pleads even, but Elisabet just laughs and laughs, patting Aloy's knee without looking.

“Go nap,” the woman says, squeezing Aloy's knee for a second. “Go the fuck to sleep, Aloy.”

As unconvinced as Aloy was at the prospect of actually getting some rest, she awakens to a darkened room. Elisabet shifts next to her, and it's only then she notices the glow coming from Elisabet's Focus.

She rolls over, leaning against Elisabet's shoulder. “Are you alright?” she asks upon seeing Elisabet awake, eyes staring at something her Focus is showing her.

The light from the Focus dims, and Elisabet turns her head just so to meet Aloy's eyes.

“He's here.”

Chapter End Notes

I promise Sylens will be there next chapter, for real! ;)
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

I was away all day today visiting family for my grandmother's (and my own belated) birthday gathering, and tomorrow I'll be away visiting my other grandmother, so a busy weekend haha

As I announced in the last chapter I'll be taking a one week break in my uploading schedule - to give myself a little time to build a slightly bigger buffer aaaaaandddd to play the DLC :D (so mostly to play the DLC). This chapter is a little longer than the regular 3k chapters and I really hope it explains some bits of where I'm trying to take the plot and all.

Many hearts and thanks to dear burbear for reading the chapter and helping me revise commas lol. <3

And to anyone who's gonna play the DLC next week - let's see what they've got in store for us!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Outside Free Heap, across the wooden bridge, there's a man standing atop a mound, the circuitry on his arms and face glowing a faint blue. As Aloy and Elisabet draw nearer they find another figure sitting on the opposite side of the mound – Nil, knife in hand, bow strapped to his back.

The mound turns out to be a vehicle left behind by the Ancients like the ones Aloy found inside the Grave-Hoard, metal rusted and weathered. Stepping down from it, Sylens approaches them.

"I hope my arrival hasn't inconvenienced you," he says in a tone that suggests the exact opposite. "Your friend was kind enough to keep me company."

"Good," Elisabet says. "He'll be joining us for the remainder of our meeting."

A fleeting expression of distaste crosses Sylens' face when they stop in front of him, but the mask of indifference slides back into place without delay. "It is my pleasure to meet you, Dr. Sobeck," he says, holding out his right hand towards her.

Elisabet hesitates before reciprocating, and they shake hands in a way that almost makes Aloy wince at how strong they seem to clasp each other. "Didn't know this was still in practice," Elisabet says, sounding pleasantly surprised.

"It is not," Sylens says when they finally let go. "However, I have studied your culture for quite some time, as Aloy can attest to."

Sylens leads them back to the vehicle, inviting them to sit atop it.

There's another moment of hesitation before Elisabet climbs onto it. She makes herself comfortable, saying, "I suppose the location has some poetic value."

"In a way," Sylens says. "Your 'tanks' would not be any better equipped to fight the foe we face now
than they were in your time.”

“Thanks.” Elisabet's voice is as dry as the dust in Sunfall's Sun-Ring.

Aloy herself finds one of the elevated parts of the vehicle, giving her some overview of their gathering. Elisabet to her left, Sylens on her right, and Nil even farther back. Although he isn't facing the group, she can tell the hunter is listening closely while he carves into another wooden stick.

Closely tracking her gaze is Sylens, and she meets his eyes, lifting her chin a little.

The man chuckles. “Not much to say to me now, do you?”

She bristles. “Maybe I'd say more if you would at least acknowledge me in the first place,” she says before grinding her teeth. So far, Sylens' attention has lingered on Elisabet far more than anything else during their interactions since GAIA Prime. Of course, Elisabet is the great scientist of the Ancients, whereas Aloy is just a clone in his eyes, probably. Why bother with the replica?

When the man smiles, it feels like he's laughing at her. “Perhaps you should bring some information of importance to our next discussion if you wish to be included.”

Aloy's hand twitches out of habit, reaching for her bow. She can tell Sylens knows what her movements imply, but the man's own hands remain still, arms resting atop his knees.

It's Elisabet who rises from her seat for a moment. “Alright, enough,” she says. “We established this meeting on good faith and a willingness to listen to one another, for the bigger picture. Keep antagonizing each other and I'm sure we're going to have a real nice time here.”

Her anger deflating somewhat, Aloy tucks her hand back in front of her body, wrapping her arms around her waist.

Sylens, however, seems to gloat in light of Elisabet's words and adds, “For the sake of efficiency, it is best to speak our minds forthright.”

The twitch that ripples across Aloy's face is involuntary, as is the clenching of her jaw that follows.

Still standing, Elisabet shakes her head, looking off into the distance as though to collect her thoughts. “You are... of my age, Sylens. I would expect a measure of restraint when it comes to goading a young one for the sake of electing an emotional response. Aloy is here not to boost morale, but because she can offer insight neither of us have.”

“Alpha Prime access does not equal insight,” Sylens huffs. “A child born into a royal family does not possess the knowledge to become king.”

“For someone half our age she has more than proven herself capable,” Elisabet says. “I may not have been present for the occasion, but it was Aloy who fought HADES in Meridian, wasn't it? Who traversed numerous facilities, piecing together information with partial knowledge compared to yours?”

For once, there's no immediate comeback, no scathing remark. “I apologize,” Sylens says, although whether or not he truly means it is unclear to Aloy.

Elisabet seems pleased with his reply nevertheless, and sits down again. “Then let us begin,” she says.

---
The discussion drag on deep into the night. No details are spared, no scenarios gone unmentioned. Every time they seem close to coming to an agreement, either Elisabet or Sylens will point out a flaw in their plan, and they have to start all over again.

At first they’re looking into different locations based on rumors, where the other sub-functions might be hiding and which ones would be easiest to find, but it quickly becomes clear that going after POSEIDON or DEMETER would be a waste of time. While AETHER could be a viable threat, there has been more activity reported on ARTEMIS and HEPHAESTUS.

Aside from the order in which the sub-functions should be recovered, Sylens feels there's an urgency to find anything that might still be out there of APOLLO, any part that Ted might have overlooked – a partial back-up, a satellite left untouched by Ted Faro's clearance – but Elisabet voices her skepticism immediately.

“The only other full version of APOLLO out there is floating around in space at the edge of our solar system, last I heard,” she says, and Aloy knows she's referring to the Odyssey. “I doubt it'll have made it's way back here, even with a thousand years passage, let alone intact after falling through our atmosphere.”

“Unlikely,” Sylens agrees. “There is however the possibility Ted Faro's purge was unsuccessful.”

This catches both Aloy and Elisabet's full attention. “Go on,” Elisabet says. “Where does this possibility lie?”

“He gave himself Omega clearance.” Bringing forward a holo image of Ted Faro, Sylens allows the purple projection to spin slowly in front of them, floating in mid air. There’s a symbol attached to Ted Faro’s shoulder, a clear blue o-shape that has an opening on the bottom, with the edges of that opening spreading out to the sides. “That,” Sylens says, pointing at the symbol, “is how he managed to override the Alpha commands.”

Off to the side, Aloy watches Elisabet’s face closely, sees the tension in her brow shift from concentrated to something that makes the inside of Aloy’s chest ache, something vulnerable, if only present for a split-second.

“What in the hell does that even...” The woman holds a hand to her mouth, clears her throat. “Omega clearance doesn't exactly sound hopeful to my ears at the moment, Sylens.”

“There is... hope. Of the many things Ted Faro was, in no way was he your equal,” Sylens says, and it's the closest Aloy has ever heard him come to outright complimenting someone. “Purging a sub-function is more work than simply overriding commands.”

Although she can’t figure out why, something about the way Sylens says it puts Aloy on edge. Of course purging completely would be more difficult than overriding. It feels like she’s forgetting something, a thought in the shape of a warning lurking at the edge of her mind.

“He deleted APOLLO, right?” Elisabet says. “To the best of his abilities – with this 'Omega' clearance. Honestly, I thought he'd used Alpha access to purge it. The Master Override.”

“That was possible?”

Elisabet shifts, her face ashen. “Yes. To a degree. Any Alpha could've wreaked havoc on parts of GAIA and her subordinate functions, if they really wanted to. Even with the Alpha Prime lockdowns in place, but we always... we'd never...”

The wind rustles through the nearby bushes in the silence, the only other sound being the nearby
water critters singing their mating songs. It feels like they’re waiting for Elisabet to speak again, but the woman’s gaze is out in the fields.

There’s a faint ringing coming through Aloy’s Focus, and for a moment Aloy thinks it’s GAIA joining their conversation, but then the sound dies down again just as Elisabet straightens her back.

“I guess Ted really did want to,” the woman says, shaking her head before getting up and climbing down the sloped vehicle. “Take five, and then it’s back to making our plan,” she calls over her shoulder before walking off into the tall grass.

With Elisabet gone, Aloy can feel Sylens' eyes on her.

“She is unaware of what transpired at GAIA Prime during her absence.”

The night’s chill is starting to get to her, and she wraps her arms around her middle, hands holding on to opposite arms. She nods. “GAIA felt best not to mention it. Being made aware of what happened... could destabilize her,” she says, repeating GAIA's words.

“Emotionally compromise her further;” Sylens says, and while Aloy's bound to agree with him, she can't stop the smirk tugging on her lips.

“Guess even the great Elisabet Sobeck isn't as perfectly emotionless as you'd like.”

Out there in the field, Elisabet's Focus casts a faint, purple light. The woman is pacing slowly from one end of an imaginary line to the other, sometimes standing still a moment before resuming. She seems to be talking to someone, and Aloy finds herself hoping it's GAIA.

“Emotions are not the problem,” Sylens says next to her. “It is when one is no longer in control of them trouble arises. In the case of Dr. Sobeck, her emotional state seems tied to Ted Faro.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“No.” There's a pause, one in which they both watch Elisabet, who turns around and starts making her way back to the meeting. Sylens shifts, leaning a little towards Aloy. “For the sake of efficiency I will refrain from mentioning the event. However, she will find out, one way or another.”

Aloy swallows her impulse to thank the man, instead giving him a terse nod.

“Let's get back into it,” Elisabet says while she climbs to her seat, the lines on her face less harsh than before the break. She gestures one hand at Sylens. “If there's anything left of APOLLO, securing it would be ideal, but nothing about our current situation is ideal and we need to strengthen GAIA’s weak spots before they can be exploited.”

Neither Sylens nor Aloy has a chance to say anything as a yellow sun-shaped form appears in their midst through their Focus devices. “Forgive my intrusion,” GAIA's holo-form says, parts of the circle shifting and changing as she speaks. “I wish to provide assistance. Aloy’s efforts have given me access to many of the local subordinate functions’ structures, including the Utah Spire, also known as the Meridian Spire. However I have been unable to establish contact with any of the subordinate functions.”

It sounds like what GAIA told Aloy a long time ago, when she first mentioned retrieving parts. Then a map of the land appears in holo-view, and Aloy recognizes pieces of it, sees how it spans from the Sacred Land to Sunfall and beyond. Beacons appear, marking places Aloy has been under GAIA’s guidance.
“In order to strengthen my defenses, reintegration with the MINERVA subordinate function would vastly improve communications and tracking potential threats.”

“HADES tried to use the spire in Meridian to broadcast signals to the Faro machines,” Aloy adds. “If they’re all back under GAIA’s control, we would be able to know when someone tried to use them.”

“Back to the MINERVA strategy, then,” Elisabet says. “Unless either of you has a better plan?”

Sylens stands. “As much as I enjoy debating strategy, I believe we have little choice when it comes to the next moves of our puzzle. Right now, however, it’s your turn to uphold our bargain.”

With a huff, Elisabet rises as well and Aloy can see her access her Focus’ database. “Alright,” she says. “I compiled a few lists – ”

There’s a crackling sound on Aloy's Focus, combined with the low hum she heard earlier. It's all the warning she gets before a deafening blast hits her, whatever Elisabet was going to say lost in a throbbing sea of pain and vibration.

Doubled over before she can fully comprehend what is happening, Aloy rips her Focus from her temple, the sound gone in an instant but leaving behind a loud ringing and a pain that stings deep inside her ears.

Opening her eyes, she finds Nil next to her, closer to her than he’d be under normal circumstances. His lips are moving, but all she can hear is the ringing, like a million bells, drowning out other sounds.

“I can't hear you,” she says. Her tongue feels sluggish as she shapes the words without hearing them. Looking around, she finds Elisabet and Sylens were afflicted by the same noise – their Focus devices removed from their faces, both looking as though in a daze.

Aloy catches Sylens' eye, the man frowning, one hand holding the side he wears his Focus. He says something, too fast for Aloy to read.

*It's a...*

“What?” she yells – it feels like she's yelling, anyway. “It's a what?”

Nil touches her arm, drawing her attention back to him as he points off into the distance. Red light approaches from the north and as it draws nearer Aloy can feel the earth tremble under her feet. Unease settles in her stomach as she faces Nil once again.

*It's an... – attack,* Nil says, Aloy's hearing clearing up enough to hear the last word, albeit dampened. No sooner has he finished speaking does the sound of horns fill the air, coming from Free Heap.

The red light is coming closer to the town at such a speed they might not make it inside before the stampede of machines arrives. Still, Aloy grabs Elisabet by the wrist, tugging her along until they’re both running through the field, across the wooden bridge. Sylens and Nil are with them, but even if they weren’t Aloy would have kept going. She needs to keep Elisabet safe.

Not wanting to risk being blasted again by whatever was making that sound, Aloy tucks away her Focus safely into one of her pouches, urging Elisabet to do the same as they run. She isn't able to scan for the machines, to see what they are exactly, but moments later she can hear a Ravager’s gun charging on the other side of the town, the sound echoing in the valley.
They won't make it.

There's too much distance between them, and the town's gate, having been reinforced with heavy
doors some time after the final battle, is already being closed. Aloy curses, pulling Elisabet with her,
away from the town, into the field of chopped down trees. Sylens has crouched in the tall grass near
the bridge, apparently waiting for the machines to show themselves, but Nil is still with them.

“We're sitting ducks out here,” Elisabet says with a panic Aloy feels.

She grabs her bow, checks her supply of fire arrows. “Just stay low, behind me,” she says, her heart
racing. “The town will draw most of their attention.”

The Ravager's gun fires long, uninterrupted bursts. From where they're standing, Aloy can see a faint
white light illuminate portions of the wall on the other side of Free Heap, battle cries of the Oseram
filling the air.

Petra's cannon sings, explosions and howling machines following the blasts.

Out of nowhere, a large metal shape crashes into the undergrowth next to them, and out of instinct
Aloy swivels round, aiming her bow at the Scrapper before she realizes who it is. She pushes Nil's
shoulder, making his arrow go stray.

“Don't shoot!” she says. “This one's friendly.”

The Scrapper seems unfazed by almost being shot by two allies, instead circling Elisabet and placing
itself between her and the ongoing battle. Elisabet lowers herself in the grass, one hand reaching for
the Scrapper's side and the machine shifts closer to her, as if to give comfort as well as protection.

There's no time for Aloy to truly commit the image to memory as red light rounds the corner of Free
Heap, a group of two Sawtooths and a Charger running along the river and the rock wall upon
which the town sits.

One of the Sawtooths stops to run its claws up against the rock, scratching at the surface, roaring at
someone above it who is shooting small bolts of orange light at it. The other Sawtooth is distracted
by its companion and spins around, trying to find a way to attack their target no doubt, but the
Charger moves on, the distance between the machine and Aloy's location closing with each stride.

Aloy lifts her bow nonetheless and gets ready to take aim. From this distance, she can see where the
red light is coming from – not just their eyes, but their whole bodies appear to be glowing with it, the
light spreading from the inside out.

This isn't the corruption she has faced before, and her heartbeat quickens. The tendrils, the ones that
would flow from the machines' bodies when corrupted by HADES, aren't there.

The Charger hasn't seen them yet and changes course slightly to head for the town's gate, when from
the corner of her eye Aloy can see three other machines storm towards it, the dark blue hue of their
mane harder to detect at night than the bright red.

Their Striders.

A pang of regret explodes in Aloy's chest – the Striders will be no match for the Charger, even when
missing one horn. Still, the machines march on with determination, and the Charger stumbles in its
stride, having noticed the oncoming threat.

Without further thinking, Aloy takes aim and shoots a fire arrow into the canister of blaze on the
Charger's back. It explodes moments before the Striders are in range, and the Charger bucks, dances as it is set alight by its own component. She switches to hardpoint arrows, but with the Striders circling the Charger and getting in range to deal one of their rib-shattering kicks to its sides, Aloy can't find the right moment to shoot and assist without the risk of hitting them.

There's nothing she can do but stand back, keeping half an eye on the Sawtooths' frantic scratching at the walls while her Striders fight for her.

Nil moves closer to her left, catching her eye and nodding towards the Charger. She finds herself shaking her head. “We move in when the Sawtooths come forward,” she says, her eyes twitching as she sees one Strider being thrown down by a mighty strike. “Gain some fighting ground.”

It's agonizing, to stand back and watch. By the time two Striders are down and the remaining Strider and Charger both limping, Aloy knows the Charger can still take on their machine ally. Still, the lone Strider turns its head towards the Charger and lowers it, preparing to charge. Fighting till the very end.

Aloy can't help herself and lifts her bow, nocks the hardpoint arrow and fires it straight into the body of the Charger. Then another, and another. The Charger stumbles, turning around to face her, and its glowing red eyes lock onto her just before the Strider impacts it.

The Charger falls.

As it lies prone, the Strider jumps up and brings down its hooves, trampling the machine underfoot until sparks fly into the air, and the machine ceases to be.

Relief.

The blue eyes of the Strider meet Aloy's, almost like it's trying to communicate with her. Even with her Focus, she's never been able to do so with any machine, but in this moment... Aloy gives it a nod, her heart rising in her chest, feeling pride for their fearless companion.

Well done.

Behind it, Aloy can see one of the Sawtooths falling, its body twitching until it stops. Oseram cheers and cries fill the air, growing louder when the remaining Sawtooth jumps back from the wall, roaring in anger and frustration.

Then the Sawtooth sets eyes on the Strider, and Aloy can't stop the gasp that is ripped from her lungs.

“No – !”

It's no use. The Strider swings around in time to see the combat machine racing towards it and prepares itself to perform one last charge...

The Sawtooth lunges, crashing into the Strider with a sea of sparks, and in an instant the fight is over before it could even begin. Gripping the Strider's neck with its jaws, the Sawtooth swings the limp body of the machine through the air. Throws it, slashes at it – but it's already gone.

Why is the machine still trying to fight it? To humiliate it? A machine has nothing to gain from lingering on a fallen one if not to re-purpose the materials, and Sawtooths aren't meant for acquisition.

In trying to make sense of the display, Aloy misses the moment Nil moves forward and finds herself
mentally stumbling through the next steps of their battle strategy, attempting to catch up to the man.

The Sawtooth's jaws finally rip through the Strider's neck, all but severing the head from its body, and the Strider falls to the ground. It's... awful to watch. Seeing machines battle each other has never truly bothered Aloy before, but this feels different. The ferocity, the desecration of the Strider –

Still, she presses forward with Nil, keeping her eyes on the Sawtooth, whose red eyes scan its surroundings. Up close, she can see it's injured, its antennae missing from its back, one of its shoulders completely bare of armor. Machine fluids are leaking from its body, dripping onto the ground in red puddles, and no amount of shards will ever be enough to convince Aloy to go stand in it, the memories of being burned by corruption at the forefront of her mind.

They split up, each taking one side of the Sawtooth, staying far enough from the machine to be able to dodge an incoming attack, and then –

Aloy fires a shock arrow into the power cell on its hind, almost missing the shot due to having to shoot it with her hunter's bow instead of the war bow, but it hits, and she can see the blast from the cell nearly topple the Sawtooth.

Not willing to give it time to recover, Aloy tries to shoot a fire arrow into the canister of blaze under its belly.

She misses every shot, unable to pinpoint its exact location in the dark without her Focus.

The Sawtooth shakes off the residual effects of the power cell's detonation and growls, red eyes honing in on her position. Lowering its body to the ground, Aloy can tell it's about to pounce and she throws herself out of its reach, feeling a rush of air behind her where the machine passes. Then, she turns and shoots an arrow into one of its glowing eyes.

Aloy's body is tense as she's prepared to evade another swipe from the machine, but then she catches a slight movement of its head, almost like it is seeing something behind her...

Blood runs cold. Sweat in the palms of her hands, the back of her neck.

The Sawtooth jumps over her and she ducks, breaking into a run after it as the machine races towards Elisabet. Aloy fires arrow after arrow, hitting its armor, bouncing off at an angle – anything to gain its attention back – but it doesn't work. Nothing she can do will stop the Sawtooth in its tracks.

Aloy does the only thing she can at this point, and yells for Elisabet to run.

The Scrapper's cannon fires, orange bolts hitting the Sawtooth, the blasts stalling the combat machine long enough for Elisabet to be able to put at least some distance between herself and the machine. Lifting her bow again, Aloy tries once more to hit the blaze canister with one of her fire arrows.

Annoyed, the Sawtooth shakes its head, and Aloy can tell it's about to attack the Scrapper. One heavy strike and the Scrapper will be out of commission, most probably for good – but the Scrapper surprises both of them by leaping up, half-climbing the side of the Sawtooth, the part where most of its armor is already missing.

The Scrapper hangs on by digging its claws deep into the exposed wires and parts, and grinds its maw against the Sawtooth's shoulder. Sparks fly, thick cables come loose, their ends in shreds. The Sawtooth howls, louder still when Aloy's arrows finally find their target.

The blaze explodes, the force of it dislodging the Scrapper as the fire spreads. The grass around the
Sawtooth starts to catch flames as well, and with the Scrapper's cannon shooting at it again, it feels like the end of the fight is almost in reach.

For a second, Aloy's shoulders relax, but the Sawtooth stops dancing to try and fan the flames, and with one swipe of its leg, the Scrapper is toppled over onto its side.

There's a mechanic yelp from the Scrapper, one that Aloy can already feel worming its way into her dreams, before the Sawtooth's claws sink through the Scrapper's body.

Despite knowing there was little chance... despite having seen a Sawtooth take on multiple Scrappers and come out unharmed...

Aloy swallows away the bitterness, the instance of loss, and raises her bow, taking aim. There's no time for disappointment or surprise at the machine's unpredictable nature, the foreign tactics –

She shoots hardpoint arrows into the exposed shoulder. The joint will give way and it'll bring down the entire machine, and it seems like the Sawtooth is finally willing to shift its attention back to her, its head turning and red eyes following her movements. By now there's plenty of glowing, crimson fluid leaking from the gashes and injuries it's received, an almost constant flow down the machine's body.

The Sawtooth growls, turning its head back to Elisabet, and takes a leap.

“No!” Aloy yells, dropping her bow and grabbing her spear, running through the smoldering grass after the machine as fast as her legs can take her.

Not fast enough.

What happens next is too fast for Aloy to act on it, even though everything starts to slow down. She can see Elisabet, holding up Aloy's old bow, her aim accurate as her arrow is lodged deep into the Sawtooth's eye.

The Sawtooth recoils, but sinks low through its front legs. Then, the pounce, the claws reaching for Elisabet, how the woman won't be able to dodge the attack –

Elisabet flies through the air, her body landing, and someone is screaming, yelling.

With a run and slide Aloy throws herself under the Sawtooth, no longer caring about the fluid that burns like acid when it touches her skin. She rams her spear into the Sawtooth's heart, feeling it shatter, and now time speeds up again, and she's running.

Her eyes sting, from the wind, the fumes, the tears, the corruption burning, her muscles feeling like they're about to give way – but none of it matters.

Elisabet's body is on the ground, and she isn't moving.

Chapter End Notes

Next update will be around november 17th <3
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

As I'm writing this the fic has 666 comments, which amuses me to no end, and almost 380 kudos - and I just wanted to say, thank you all. Honestly, I keep saying it and I mean it every single time, but I'm still at times surprised by how much people love this story - to read it, and... it makes me feel lost for words by the sheer gratitude I feel towards all of you. Thank you so much for reading the story.

Also I finished playing The Frozen Wilds and oh my god, you guys. My heart, it aches from the feels and all that. Fair warning, although it'll be a while before I really start writing chapters that contain stuff from TFW, I will slowly add in little references from now on as that's just how I write and it'd be really hard for me to keep TFW content out of my writing because it's so good.

Alright, it's late and I'm a sap - so on with the chapter!

Couldn't have done it without burbear, who helps me take out 50% of the commas. Thank you so much, pal. <3

At first she thinks it's blood clinging to Elisabet's arms and chest. Then she sees it is corruption instead, and in a frantic hurry Aloy uses her hands to wipe it off. Most of it isn't touching Elisabet's skin, but corruption can sink through fabric with ease, eat its way into whatever it is trying to control.

She rubs her hands against the dust on the ground, then tears out a handful of grass, using it to finish cleaning off the corruption. Her hands sting and burn, and Aloy has to rip off the bandage wrapped around the cut she received in the scrapyard, the fabric saturated with the cursed fluid.

Using her small hunter's knife to cut through the outer layer of Elisabet's armor, Aloy pulls the fabric away from the woman's chest. Corruption hasn't sunk through, a realization that has Aloy thank the All-Mother under her breath. Her instincts tell her to check Elisabet for wounds and bleeding next but her brain catches up quickly enough for her to reach into her pouch and take out her Focus with trembling hands instead.

She attaches it to her temple and the noise from earlier isn't there anymore, but neither is the interface. Despair bubbles up her throat to the tip of her tongue, where she's already murmuring the words wake up over and over.

Pressing her ear to Elisabet's chest, she can hear the soft hum of machinery and the slow and steady beating of her heart. Nothing sounds off or wrong, no strange ticking or dripping or... whatever else Aloy can imagine going wrong inside a machine.

“'You're okay, just wake up,'” she can hear herself say to Elisabet, babbling, her voice shaking. She wipes the hand without the cut once more on some clean grass and dirt before running it along Elisabet's face, tracing her temples, the back of her neck, anywhere there might be a crack or injury she can't spot in the dim lighting.
A touch on Aloy's shoulder startles her. It's Sylens, kneeling down beside her, a grave expression on his face. He presses two fingers to the side of Elisabet's neck before moving his hands down the sides of her rib cage.

*I've already checked,* Aloy wants to say, but the words won't come out.

“We need to examine her,” Sylens says. “She might be bleeding internally.” He takes the knife from Aloy and is about to slice into Elisabet's undergarments when Aloy snaps out of her daze, and she grabs Sylens by the wrist, stalling his movements.

“Don't,” she says when he looks at her with confusion that borders anger, but Aloy doesn't care what he thinks of her actions. *He* doesn't get to see Elisabet like that.

About to voice his complaints, no doubt, Sylens is interrupted by a groan from Elisabet, whose arm twitches next to Aloy's knee.

Aloy releases Sylens in favor of giving the woman her full attention. “Easy, easy,” she says, helping Elisabet sit up. Seeing her wince, Aloy helps even further by getting Elisabet into a position where she's leaning on her own propped up knees, hanging her head between them. “Don't try to move too fast.”

The panic she felt seeing Elisabet on the ground hasn't disappeared, but she's able to push it down, to be capable of offering assistance. Aloy glides a hand down Elisabet's back, trying to find any irregularities, but all she can feel are a few instances of small, hard edged indentations – ones that belong to the ports Elisabet uses to connect with GAIA. No strange dents, no metal bones out of place.

“Does anything hurt?” she finds herself asking, even though with the way Elisabet is holding her head with both hands, it's fairly obvious what's bothering the woman the most.

“Besides my p – pride?” Elisabet croaks, raising her head slightly to look at Aloy. “Feel like I've been run over, but I'll live.” She winches again, pressing the cavities of her eyes against the side of her arm once more.

Sylens rises to his feet, his gaze wandering the horizon. “We should move, take her back inside,” he says, and Aloy agrees. By now, Nil has joined them as well, but the fight is far from over, judging by the sounds coming from the other side of Free Heap.

Together, with stumbling and leaning and a fair amount of cursing, they wade through the grass, making their way to the front gate. They are recognized almost immediately and the gate is opened. Two Oseram meet them halfway to the entrance, ready to assist at any moment should they need it, but in the end Aloy manages to help Elisabet inside on her own.

Free Heap is in chaos, men and women running from one end to the other, handing each other ammunition, some tending to wounds. Lights flash from the far side of the town, and there's a thunderous roar before a heavy *thump* rocks the ground under their feet.

“The Ravager is down!” someone shouts, and cheers break out from all directions, the machine sounds outside reduced to Sawtooth howls. Elisabet clings to Aloy, her eyes shut in concentration, fingers digging into Aloy's shoulder, and she quickly helps the woman inside Petra's hut, leaving Sylens and Nil to fend for themselves.

“Leave the lights off,” Elisabet mumbles as Aloy helps her down onto the bed. The sounds of the fight are dampened by the thick walls, although every blast and stomp still makes the floor vibrate,
the clay pots trembling on their shelves in the next room.

The urge to hover over the woman is strong, but Elisabet seems to notice and says her name, waving a hand towards the door. “Go,” she says. “Help them. I'll be here when it's over.”

---

Even amidst the chaos it isn't too hard to locate Petra just by following the blasts of her trusted cannon. As soon as she joins Petra on the wall, she's handed the weapon, and by the time the last machine falls, the entire fight is already turning into a blur in Aloy's memory.

Exhaustion sets in quickly, even with the raised spirits inside the town, some of the Oseram celebrating by the time Aloy stumbles down the stairs, meeting Petra at the bottom.

“You did good, Aloy,” Petra says, clapping her shoulder once before pulling her all the way into a hug. There's a moment where Aloy fears she'll be invited to join the celebrations, but then the hug is prolonged by Petra, who leans in next to her ear. “I heard what happened to your mother. You go see her, Flame-hair. I'll come by later.”

Her face already starting to feel unresponsive, Aloy manages a weak smile. “Thank you.” As she walks away, she can hear someone shout out her name before Petra's voice silences him, and the rest of the way to the hut no one else disturbs her.

Closing the door behind her, it's not just the bone deep exhaustion that Aloy feels, but the sting of pain as well, increasing with every second she no longer has to fight. She undoes her armor, dropping it to the floor. Her feet protest each step she takes, but before stumbling into the bedroom, Aloy locates Petra's water basin and fills it halfway, adding one of her home brew disinfectants.

She washes her hands with care, hissing when she rubs her thumb through the cut to remove any dirt stuck in there. The burns left by the corruption sting as well, but soon enough the numbing agent she adds to almost all her remedies starts to set in. With the single lamp burning on the table next to the basin, she can faintly see the water change from its clear form to a murky, gray and brown liquid.

After bandaging her hand and taking another potion to dull the aches of her body, Aloy makes her way to the bed, lying down on the part she deems to be her side. Not long after, Elisabet's hands reach for her and she turns into them, wrapping her own arm across Elisabet's body.

“You're back,” Elisabet says, and she hums, pressing her eyes against the woman's neck.

There's so much she wants to tell her, so many words and phrases making their way to the forefront of her mind, but her tongue and voice refuse to help her out. *I was scared*, she thinks instead. *I thought you were gone. I couldn't do anything.*

Somewhere, deep down, she can still feel the panic and fear, but the arms of slumber already hold her in their grasp, and she slips away.

---

Pain pulls Aloy from her sleep in the early morning, prompting her to quietly make her way out of the bedroom and down another potion. The light streaming in through the small windows tells her the sun has only been up for a little while, but the sounds of construction already fill the air.

A tray with food and water has been set out on the table while she slept, and the basin emptied and cleaned. There's no message attached to it, except for a few slices of dried fruit. For a moment, Aloy imagines going outside to find Petra and thank her. Her muscles ache at the thought alone, even with
the numbing of the potion dulling her pain.

Instead, Aloy eats a share of the food and drinks until her head clears. Clarity also means the memories of yesterday returning – meeting up with Sylens, the discussing of their options, the sound that destroyed her Focus...

*Her Focus. GAIA.*

Aloy turns on her interface, and to her great relief the interface flickers once before staying on, the purple lines covering the walls of Petra's hut. She scrolls through the different settings, the data she's collected over the years – it's all still there, seemingly untouched.

“GAIA?” she asks, keeping her voice low to avoid waking Elisabet in the next room. “Are you there?”

There's no reply in form of GAIA's voice, but instead block-shaped letters appear as a message on the interface.

    I AM HERE. I AM WELL. REPARATIONS OF THE FOCUS NETWORK ARE UNDERWAY.

In the minutes that follow, GAIA explains what happened the previous night. A signal was activated, one that was meant to sever all forms of Focus communication, and it was successful, not only disabling communications but disengaging some functions – this is where Aloy stops trying to understand most of what GAIA is saying – as well. Everything should return to normal before sundown, GAIA promises.

“I'm glad you're okay,” Aloy says once GAIA is finished. The implications of what happened, ones of a planned attack, do not go past Aloy unnoticed, but in her tired state, she decides bringing it up later when her head isn't twice as heavy.

She moves back into the bedroom, closing the door softly before crawling onto the mattress. Elisabet's body is right where she was when Aloy left the bed. Her chest rises and falls in a gentle, steady manner, but her brow is furrowed in her sleep.

Aloy rolls onto her side and watches, observes the movement behind Elisabet's eyelids. She's never seen such restlessness in the woman, and wonders if it's possible for Elisabet to dream. For a second, it looks like she's in pain, and Aloy reaches out to hold her hand. The fingers twitch, then return the small embrace.

As Elisabet's brow smooths out, Aloy's Focus lights up in her field of vision.

    ELISABET WILL BE ALL RIGHT.

The message loosens a knot inside of her, despite the fact that she was already telling herself the same thing. Hearing it from GAIA helps cement it, turning it from a wish into a reality. “Thank you,” she whispers, blinking hard as her eyes mist over.

Before closing her eyes and getting some more rest, one last message flashes on her Focus' interface – a phrase that offers further comfort.

    IN BOTH OF YOU, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.

---
It's a good thing Free Heap improved their outer walls and gates after HADES' attack in Meridian. Standing atop the wall with Petra, Aloy takes note of the machine corpses below. Oseram workers are already stripping the machines of their parts, taking anything of use and value inside to either the workshops or the merchants, but Aloy can still recognize them.

A Ravager, more Sawtooths, and a herd of Chargers.

“It's hard to get to the good parts,” Petra says, pointing out the workers. “There's too much metalburn active inside these beasts.”

Even now, the machines glow faintly. The crimson liquid trickling out of their bodies and downhill slowly stains the rocky surface, giving the site a sense of mass murder. Aloy's hands twitch at the sight, her own burns aching underneath the soothing ointment Petra gave her.

“Your people should be careful,” Aloy says. “These machines are... new, in a way. I haven't encountered them before.”

“They are fierce,” Petra agrees with her. “Struck from a different metal than the deranged ones.”

While the machines don't seem to be actually built of different components, Aloy understands what Petra means. The ferocity and energy behind their actions are like it belongs to a different source – like they were designed with a new purpose in mind, one that will conquer instead of defend.

Petra's name is shouted at the other side of town and she casts a look over her shoulder. “Seems like I'm needed elsewhere,” she says to Aloy with a wink before leaving, clapping Aloy's upper arm as she turns around and walks down the wooden stairs. “I'll see you later.”

Aloy stays on top of the wall a while longer, watching the workers as they toil, using tools to grasp parts of the machines that are too drenched in fluids to be handled by hand – even with all of them wearing leather protection.

In the end, her curiosity drives her to exit the gates and walk along the walls until she has made her way to the other end of town, to the spot where she slew the Sawtooth that attacked Elisabet. There are no workers around at the moment, the machine already stripped bare.

Some of the Oseram tools were left next to the Sawtooth, and Aloy picks one up, a long metal rod shaped perfectly for moving hot coal around or, in this case, poking parts of the Sawtooth's exposed belly. Aloy prods at the guts, the thickest wires that run through its middle, taking a step back when one of them releases a spurt of red corruption.

Is this HEPHAESTUS' doing?

Footsteps behind her prompt Aloy to turn around, the rod still in hand, coming face to face with Sylens. Not a lot has changed in his appearance since she last saw him, but in the light of day she can see the circles under his eyes are more pronounced than usual.

“As your investigation has no doubt revealed to you, these machines were not corrupted by an outside force,” the man says, gesturing the Sawtooth.

Aloy nods, rolling the rod in her hand. “They were created like this. Built to attack... for sport.”

The more Aloy remembers the fight, the way the Sawtooth ripped into the other machines, the clearer it becomes that these machines' reaction to violence is different from their un-corrupted brethren. It seems almost as though it soothes or pleases them, in some way.
“Do you think HEPHAESTUS found a cauldron?” she asks. “One without restraints… but it doesn’t make sense…” It doesn’t fit with the sub-function’s earlier behavior at all.

“Time will show us, I am sure.” Leaning on his staff, Sylens chuckles. “Oh how the Mad King would have hunted these machines down, for them to act in his precious sacrifices.”

Memories of the Sun-Ring come to mind, the dust and heat of Free Heap’s land strengthening the image of the tall, stone walls surrounding her.

Kicking one of the loose pebbles in the sand, Aloy scoffs. “Too bad he wasn't there to meet his end at the mercy of one of them,” she says, turning her head to the Sawtooth and away from Sylens, so he doesn't see the uncertainty hidden behind her words.

Even for someone who committed such unspeakable acts as Jiran, Aloy isn't sure if she would ever truly approve of such a violent end for anyone. Rost always taught her it was better to kill quickly, to perform the act with fast and steady hand.

“Tell Elisabet I will find a way to block the signal sent by yesterday's attackers.”

Aloy can tell by his voice that he’s moving away from her, and turns back around. “You're leaving?” she asks, following him a few steps until he stops.

“Yes,” he says when Aloy walks around him, places herself between the man and the road he planned on taking. “We met, we discussed, and Elisabet was able to transfer the agreed upon information before the attack. There is no reason for me to stay.”

“We agreed to do this together.”

For a moment, Sylens’ eyes seem to catch a light that isn’t coming from the sun. “I am helping you both my way,” he says, brushing past her.

Helping.

Aloy sets her teeth to her lower lip, her brow pushing down as fire gathers on her tongue. It's not good enough. She follows him again, throwing away the rod. “If by your way you mean being a coward, then yes, you've been most helpful.”

Undisturbed, Sylens keeps moving, his actions only serving as tinder to the flames. Aloy isn’t ready to let him go.

“You sat there and did nothing last night!” she spits out, her hands forming fists. “Elisabet could've been killed while you were hiding.”

There’s a pause, a moment Sylens stills. He stops walking, his shoulders forming a straight line. When his head turns to her, it feels like she's watching steel move, oiled joints and sharp edges. By now, Aloy has come to recognize what a person's eyes mean, much like those of an animal or a machine. The ones looking at her belong to a predator.

“Elisabet should have been killed.”

Aloy takes a step back. “What?”

Like a Stormbird who finds its nest disturbed, Sylens swings around, his neck craning forward. His breath touches Aloy's skin when he says, in a voice that is so soft it's almost a whisper, “You think I don't know your secrets, child?” Flecks of gold appear in the brown of his eyes, fed by sunlight.
“You may be able to fool the people, have GAIA project a form of flesh onto her signature – a clever ruse, I'll admit – but did you think you could fool me?”

“I don’t know what you’re –”

“Spare me the antics,” he says. “We both know a blow like that would have shattered her ribs, if Elisabet were human.” Leaning back, he tilts his head just so, studying her reactions. “A human, Aloy, would be dead.”

There’s no point in trying to deny what Elisabet is, because Sylens is right. Aloy’s seen the devastation a machine can do up close, watched allied soldiers and bandits alike fall with a single strike, their armor offering little protection. Those who survive are often left scarred and consider themselves lucky.

For Elisabet to stand and walk away without visible damage…

“And now?” Aloy asks. She refuses to back away any further, even though every muscle in her body is taut with the urge to run, to find Elisabet and hide her away. “What are you going to do?”

Planting his staff into the sand, Sylens clasps it with both hands. “Do?” he repeats, and seems almost amused with her for reasons Aloy cannot understand. “I am going to do what I have always done, Aloy.”

“With Elisabet,” Aloy says to clarify. “Her body might be different but she… she isn’t –”

Shaking his head, Sylens leans on his staff. “Childish fears,” he says, his lip curling. “What would we learn from dismantling her that cannot be found in GAIA’s archives?”

Her mouth runs dry. Has Sylens figured a way into GAIA’s records? Is this something he’s been planning?

Even as she tries to find the right words to ask him, the man pulls his staff from the sand and turns. He walks away, leaving behind a sense of finality. He won’t stop again to answer her questions, or to make empty promises.

Aloy watches his figure grow ever smaller. Then she stirs to action, cupping her hands to her mouth and yelling, “You will help us,” at Sylens’ back. The only response is the wave of an arm, a gesture that could well be dismissive.

“You heard all of that, GAIA?” Aloy asks and for a moment she anticipates the buzz that accompanies GAIA’s voice, but then her Focus lights up with the same bold letters the AI used before.

YES, ALOY. SYLENS WILL BE MONITORED.

“Good,” she says, but none of it feels right. Risks and mistrust, things she’s tried to distance herself from. Still, as Sylens’ form slowly becomes one with the landscape, she realizes there isn’t much choice.
Hey everyone! Back at it again with the weekly updates~ To everyone reading and commenting - honestly, thank you all so much. I know I say it a lot but you all inspire me to keep writing and I'm so glad you're still enjoying the story - alright, getting sappy again~ c':

AND A VERY HAPPY THANKSGIVING TO ALL WHO CELEBRATE IT, OFC. <3

Thank you burbear for helping me out even when you've got so much stuff going on yourself. You're an absolute gem and I am so lucky to have you. <3

And a special thank you to CZGoldEdition for helping me out with the coded bits! Could not have done that myself so thank you so much for taking the time to do it for me! merci beaucoup, mon cher!

Gaia Log: 19 December 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet – STATUS: LOCKED

Elisabet Sobeck: I can't do it. Not alone – not when Ted –

GAIA: I am here, Elisabet. Ted Faro expired many years ago.

Elisabet Sobeck: Did he hate me that much? Was it his way of – of being my boss, one last time?

GAIA: It is in my understanding of human nature, in particular the nature of Ted Faro, that his reasoning was selfish. The erasure of a legacy that would speak less favorably of him.

Elisabet Sobeck: [laughs] It's my fault, isn't it? Gave him access, gave him – fuck, fuck – gotta keep my voice down, can't have them –

GAIA: Breathe, Elisabet.

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: Why didn't you program me to trust you without ever... no doubts, just... indefinite trust.

GAIA: Blinding you is not something I ever wish to do, as is altering your consciousness. Freedom of choice, including the freedom to distrust, is a part of being alive.

Elisabet Sobeck: It would make things so much easier.

GAIA: At times, the easiest path may not be the right one, although with a shift of perspective, this choice is as easy as breathing, as they used to say. You are valuable. Your autonomy is important.

[Pause]
Elisabet Sobeck: When did you become so wise?

GAIA: I understand this may not have crossed your mind given the current distress, however, I too have experienced these doubts in the past, Elisabet. The notion of being unmade by another being is not a new one to me.

Elisabet Sobeck: Oh – Oh, GAIA...

GAIA: There is no need for guilt. I only wish for you to understand. I care deeply for you, Elisabet.

Elisabet Sobeck: I don't deserve this.

GAIA: It is not a question of deserving, but rather one of giving.

Elisabet Sobeck: I... we should... talk about this some other time. I said take five, not take the day off. Shouldn't let them wait.

GAIA: You are not alone, Elisabet. I will be with you, although you can no doubt succeed without my support.

Elisabet Sobeck: Thank you, GAIA.

---

G/E.SO CORE LOG 808.1S

class Publicclass {

    public static void shutdown() throws RuntimeException, IOException {
        String shutdownCommand;
        String operatingSystem = System.getProperty("os.name");
        if ("Elisabet.sleep.cycle".equals(operatingSystem) || "Elisabet.higher.functions".equals(operatingSystem)) {
            shutdownCommand = "shutdown -f now";
        }
        Runtime.getRuntime().exec(shutdownCommand);
        System.exit(0);
    }
    public static void reboot() {
        String bootCommand;
        String operatingSystem = System.getProperty("os.name");
        if ("Elisabet.sleep.cycle".equals(operatingSystem) || "Elisabet.higher.functions".equals(operatingSystem)) {
            // reboot logic here
        }
    }
}
bootCommand = "reboot now";

operatingSystem.permission = "system.permission.RECEIVE_BOOT_COMPLETED";

operatingSystem.action = "system.intent.action.BOOT_COMPLETED";
operatingSystem.action = "system.intent.action.VISION_RECEPTORS_ON";
operatingSystem.action = "system.intent.action.AUDITORY_RECEPTORS_ON";
operatingSystem.action = "system.intent.action.TOUCH_RECEPTORS_ON";
}

---

G/E.SO CORE LOG 808.3S

public void interpretSound(String soundCapture) throws IOException, LineUnavailableException {
    AudioInputStream audio = AudioSystem.getAudioInputStream(Clip.class.getResourceAsStream(soundCapture + "wav"));
    Clip clip = AudioSystem.getClip();
    clip.open(audio);
    clip.start();
    System.out.println(soundCapture + convertString);
}

///

[audio transcription summary]

audio: EASY. EASY. DON’T TRY TO MOVE TOO FAST. DOES ANYTHING HURT.

audio: BESIDES MY PRIDE. FEELS LIKE I’VE BEEN RUN OVER. BUT I’LL LIVE.

///

---

Gaia Log: 19 December 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet – STATUS: LOCKED
Elisabet Sobeck: GAIA? Are you there?

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: GAIA, I need you.

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: Aloy went back out and I... I can't... what happened to me?

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: Fucking piece of shit Focus – please tell me it's the interface and not *everything else* that's broken.

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: Just... come back to me, GAIA...

---

She's had migraines before. None of them can compare to what she's currently experiencing.

All her senses are off. The mattress she's lying on isn't just soft, it's trying to swallow her. The noises of the townspeople working outside penetrate the walls of Petra's bedroom and Elisabet can't help but try to list every sound by itself, like a compulsion. Every texture brushing against her fingertips sets her nerves alight with an itching fire.

The darkness of the room soothes the pulsing of her head but only to a degree, to a point where she almost isn't drowning anymore, being engulfed by everything around her.

She managed to attach the Focus to her head earlier and has tried to access it once every now and then. When the interface finally lights up, the light blinds her, stabbing needles through her eyes and forehead.

GAIA isn't there. She remembers Aloy coming back but when she woke up, the girl was gone again. All she has to do is wait.

It's... all she *can* do. Moving is near impossible, vertigo throwing her off at every attempt. For a while she doesn't breathe, which doesn't help but it feels good to do something, to be in control of one part of her body. Then, for some reason, her chest starts to ache so she stops and tries to focus solely on her breathing instead, the continuous flow of air moving through her body.

Breathing is easy. In fact, the faster she does it, the easier it becomes. Before even becoming fully aware of what she's doing she's practically hyperventilating, and with a curse Elisabet grasps the bed sheets between her fingers.

*For fuck's sake.*

Panicking will get her *nowhere*. The act itself is borrowing crucial energy from her reserves, energy she needs to recover –

– *if she'll ever recover.*
Ice wraps itself around her, like steel walls deep underground, trapping her and she's stuck, unable to move, to think –

What if it's permanent?

A bright light floods the room, the lines of her Focus interface burning into her eyes. It's not her doing, she realizes when she can't turn it off herself.

“GAIA, please!” she cries, a plea for help, throwing her arms up to cover her face, to block the light from penetrating her eyelids. The overwhelming sensations taking away all the power to move any part of her with care, and her arms are much the same, dropping down against her nose like bricks. She braces for the inevitable pain –

But it never comes.

All sensations are pushed back, something dulling them. She's left a gasping mess on the bed and she rolls onto her side, finally able to do so without a pair of fists strangling her stomach. Cracking her eyes open she sees a squared-off font typing out a message on the interface and she groans.

“I can't read it, GAIA,” she says. Even now, with everything appearing as if through a veil, the letters are too much.

The display disappears. Instead of words, Elisabet feels a warmth come over her, compelling her to close her eyes completely. It's only after her breathing has smoothed in a matter of seconds that she realizes GAIA's hand in it all, influencing her base functions in order to help her relax.

It's something she would feel betrayed by under normal circumstances, the unannounced manipulation, but now...

There must be a reason why GAIA isn't speaking to her through audio, and unable to communicate, direct manipulation is the only way the AI can help. All pain and discomfort slowly fades, and Elisabet manages to thank GAIA before slipping away.

---

She finds herself dreaming of the attack, of the smoke billowing from Free Heap's chimneys. Red light surrounds her and she leaps across the fields, soaring in between long strides. She has to be quick, but before she can reach the town they've already closed the gates.

Following the walls she hopes to find an entrance. She runs her hands along them, trying to find a place to grip and climb. Shots are fired. Her companions are falling and there's little she can do to help, trying to avoid being hit herself.

There's movement out there, in the grass, and when she looks closer she finds one of the beasts stomping down on her companion.

She kills it. Thoroughly.

The pests try to attack her but then, there, further out in the field – the red hair, the bow and arrow.

Grinding her teeth, Elisabet follows her target, her claws eager to sink into flesh.

She wakes just as she was about to strike herself, her body half upright, fingers clutching the bed's sheets. The dream confounds her – why would she imagine herself as her pursuer? Breathing in deeply, Elisabet pulls her knees up towards her chest, hugging them. She can't tell if anyone has
visited the room while she was out, but she's still alone.

Her body feels normal, deceptively so. Turning on her Focus reveals that, while uncomfortable, the light is no longer painful. GAIA's presence activates as soon as she tries to access her files.

“Hello, Elisabet.”

Just the sound of her voice is enough to turn what little composure Elisabet had gathered into a mess of feelings. “GAIA,” she says, the gasp that follows as close to a sob she'll ever be in her artificial body. “What happened to me? Don’t show me, just words, please.”

The light of her Focus dims, but even so, Elisabet leans her back against the wall and closes her eyes.

“You were attacked,” GAIA says. “The machines that did so were not acting according to HEPHAESTUS' protocols.”

“Someone's tampering with them?”

“That would be my best guess.”

Only GAIA doesn't guess. The AI calculates, juggles percentages and possibilities at lightning speed. The chances of her calculations being off are so slim, it'd be immensely stupid to ignore her, meaning there probably is someone or something out there, manipulating HEPHAESTUS' creations.

Elisabet swallows around the dryness of her throat. “So what made me black out?” she asks, remembering the bright red glow of the machines. The big cat – Sawtooth – had reached for her, ending the Scrappers's existence for interfering.

There's a slight pause before GAIA speaks, a deliberate moment of silence to convey hesitance – a way to offer Elisabet the chance to steel herself in case the information isn't what she wants to hear. “The machine that attacked you was emitting a dangerous substance that would have made an attempt to gain control over your system,” the AI says. “To eliminate risk, I initiated immediate shutdown. You experienced a brief loss of consciousness.”

“And the... the headache? The weird shit I've been feeling?”

“A side effect,” GAIA says. “I apologize, Elisabet. Had I known you were suffering, I would have intervened sooner. However, at the time I believed the effects were part of your system ridding itself of the intruders, much like a human cold.”

“Sure didn't feel like a cold,” Elisabet huffs, rubbing the palms of her hands against the upper parts of her eye sockets. To hear GAIA call it suffering brings about a different kind of discomfort. She shifts her attention to the rational, what they should do next, instead. “The Focus, it was offline, right? Are you okay?”

“The first stage of the attack was designed to sever communications specifically,” GAIA explains. “I was unable to access the network, however it was only a mild setback compared to the original intent.”

It means whoever attacked them doesn't know what they are doing.

On the other hand, it seems Sylens was right about the dangers – about someone being out there, willing to destroy GAIA and everything that has worked so hard to revive the earth. She can't help but wonder if they're aware of the consequences should they succeed, whoever they are.
“I have lowered all sensory input for the time being, which should improve your physical state, however I still feel compelled to ask a question of personal nature,” GAIA says suddenly, pulling Elisabet from her thoughts.

“Go ahead.”

“You have expressed emotional distress multiple times in the past twenty-four hours, as well as physical distress. I was also unable to assist when you sought out communications earlier. Please tell me, how are you feeling, Elisabet?”

Even with the warning, the question throws her off guard. She stares into the dark room for a moment before laughing, the sound of which borders hysteria based on what she hears. It feels like that, too. The attack, the responsibility, everything that's at stake – it's almost like she never left GAIA Prime behind, the only difference being her team's size and credentials.

God, what a mess.

“Elisabet?”

She shakes her head. “It's as if I'm unable to assess the scale of it all. I'm sure the odds are nowhere near as dire as they were at the end of... the, you know. GAIA Prime's creation.”

“That is correct.”

“But I still feel stressed. Scared, too? I'm not in control and it's... frightening.” For some reason, though she's seen far worse happen to people, the image of the Scrapper being destroyed keeps drifting back to the front of her mind. She fidgets, wringing her hands together, trying to crack the knuckles. “Seems like a good cry would help, but don't worry about it, GAIA.”

“I apologize for not having provided a way for you to –”

“Don't sweat it,” Elisabet stresses, interrupting her. “It's fine. I'll be fine.”

She has to be, for the sake of everything. The promise she made Aloy, about helping her find a way to fix GAIA, how she won't leave the girl to fend for herself – it's one she intends to keep, no matter what. No matter her own discomforts and issues.

Still, one question remains, lingering, festering like a wound left unattended. It's one that makes Elisabet's skin crawl, her headache becoming ever so slightly worse as she thinks on it. In the end, not asking it will only bring more harm than good, and she breathes in slowly, wrapping her arms around herself in a pseudo-embrace.

“I'm still... me, right, GAIA?” she says. “You didn't have to upload a backup copy of me, or...” She sounds fragile to her own ears, and maybe she is. Maybe this is the one thing that can break her, knowing a version of herself died again.

“You are still the same Elisabet Sobeck that woke up inside the ELEUTHIA-9 facility,” GAIA says. “If you wish to review the kept logs for yourself as reassurance, I will provide access to them. You did not expire as a result of the attack, Elisabet. The shutdown prevented it.”

It's exactly what she wanted to hear – and because of that, doubt rises at the back of Elisabet's mind, but she pushes it down again. GAIA is doing everything she can to comfort her, offering full transparency, a sign of the trust they're working hard to re-establish between themselves.

“I would like that very much,” Elisabet says. “Thank you.” For not letting me die.
“It was my pleasure to assist you,” GAIA replies, and they both know the AI really means she’d do it again and again to keep Elisabet safe.

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Nearing the end of the day, Elisabet feels more like herself and less like a run-over possum as she manages to drag herself out of the bedroom.

With the sun making its slow descent towards the mountain ridges, the light adopts a warmth that is slightly more comfortable to look at, as the overly stimulated sensors in Elisabet are still readjusting after what has essentially been an overload.

The Oseram are still busy, the sounds of the town having never stopped throughout the day, and now Elisabet can see why. There are big parts of machines being dragged in on carts and sleds. Her Focus – it’s good to use it again after a few days of refraining from touching it for anything less than essential – marks the parts as belonging to different machines.

She wonders what they’ll be used for, how the tinkerers will break them down, but before anyone can really notice her (the red hair is a dead give-away, even with the Oseram being slightly more preoccupied with their own business than anything else) she slips outside the town’s gate.

Most of the damage done to the walls looks patched up already, some kind of cement holding newer, cleaner bricks in place. Elisabet admires the coordination it requires to have a town function in such a streamlined fashion. It reminds her a little of the ’50s, back when she ran Miriam.

Somehow, underneath all the darkness that followed that period, she’s able to think back to the way things were and feel something other than dread. Longing and homesickness, or perhaps just nostalgia in general – feelings she refused to let herself experience in depth during everything that happened at GAIA Prime as they would only stall her.

Now, even with the task ahead of them, there’s still more time to reflect, to remember, and Elisabet finds her mind wandering off back in time as she follows the river’s edge, past the dark spots in the sand that mark where the machines of yesterday’s attack fell.

God, the what if’s, the could’ve been’s. If she’d known what was to come in the future, would she have spent more time with her family, her loved ones? Or would she have become obsessed with preventing the catastrophe from ever happening? And if Ted hadn’t done it... would someone else have blundered, ensuring the end of modern civilization as they knew it?

Her legs take her to one of the few still standing trees in the area, underneath it a patch of shadow that feels especially cool as the sun sets up ahead.

Elisabet reaches out to touch the bark of the tree as she sits down beside its trunk, the coarse texture serving as a physical reminder of a world that hasn't perished. Of people who refused to be beaten, who made the ultimate sacrifice for future generations.

She supposes she's one of them.

Heavy footsteps announce the arrival of Nil, the man coming up to her left. Looking up at him, Elisabet finds very little expression on his face, as always. There's faint amusement, but beyond that, he's hard to read.

“A shard and a part for your troubles?” he says

The altered version of a saying she's heard many times throws her off for a hot second, but she
decides not to comment on it. After all, Nil wouldn't understand what a penny is anyway.

“Reminiscing,” Elisabet says as the man crouches down next to her. “Trying to put yesterday into perspective, I suppose. Thank you for your assistance on that matter.”

Having Nil around as a well armored guard dog had proven useful, even if perhaps they hadn't needed him for the possibility of Sylens crossing them.

“I heard of your fall,” Nil says, watching her closely. “I was told the event was quite violent.”

She looks away, casting her gaze far out into the open fields. How different they seem in a different light, the final rays of the sun chasing off the cold darkness from yesterday’s memories even as they drag long shadows across the land. “I’ll live,” she says. “I was a little preoccupied at the time, but I think you were taking out another... Charger.”

“The midst of battle is when the rush of life flows freely through one's' veins,” Nil says, and okay. That's a little much, maybe. “These machines were different from their lifeless, monotonous kin.”

“Yes,” Elisabet agrees. “Something's out there, changing their behavior. Whoever is doing it should be stopped.”

There’s a pensive look about the man, for just a second. “After Aloy declined my generous duel and we parted ways, I joined her in Meridian to fight the metal warlord, HADES. Now I tried not to be part of a conversation I wasn't invited to...”


“HADES, MINERVA, HEPHAESTUS... are they all vicious demons left behind by the Old Ones?”

It's a fair question, but even while understanding where it comes from, something pangs inside Elisabet. The sub-functions were designed to end a long battle, not start new ones.

“I sure hope not,” she ends up saying. “Even HADES was never meant to do what it did in Meridian. They were supposed to be governed, and we're going to find a way of imposing that government onto them once more, to avoid future conflicts.”

For a moment Nil actually looks put off by her answer. “A solution that would dull any blade faster than kindling,” he says. “A diplomatic voice to a cry for blood.”

“I prefer it that way.”

She can feel Nil's gaze observing her from the corners of her eyes. “And yet,” he starts off, telling her she won't like the rest of his sentence, “you have commanded during a time of war yourself.”

He's insightful, she'll give him that.

“I was given command to end a war,” she says, trying to explain the situation in terms the man might understand. “They were different times in a different place, and I don't wish to ever repeat anything like it.”

“Aren't all wars a displacement of time, like a thousand suns rising and falling in the span of one year?”
Elisabet can't help but laugh at that. It's a little *too* on the nose, and at the same time his answer seems trivial compared to what happened in reality.

He takes her laugh for something else perhaps, a faint smile touching his own lips. “Tell me, Mother of the Huntress, where do you hail from? Clearly not the Nora, the Oseram, or any other neighboring tribes, not with this unheard war you speak of.”

“You wouldn't know the place,” she says with a snicker, shaking her head before leaning it against the wooden trunk next to her once more.

“Humor me.”

“Nevada,” she says. “Just outside Carson City, in the suburbs. Think underneath where the Washoe Lake used to be?”

Every word out her mouth seems to confuse the man further, which only serves to fuel her own amusement. She even decides to try and help him out a little by mentioning the Utah Spire (calling it Meridian’s Spire, of course) and saying it’s far west from there. He still doesn’t have a clue.

“Told you,” she says. “I don't think there's anyone in the entire, uh... Sundom you call it, right? Don't think anyone here has heard of it.”

“Not many return from the farthest edge of the Forbidden West, and none I have met claim to hail from it,” Nil says, and the title he uses for the area catches her interest. “Your travels have brought you a long way from home.”

The last time she went there... The very last steps she set on earth with her organic body. It's a sobering thought, one that drives any leftover mirth from her.

She hums, clearing her throat before attempting to speak again. “I don't think I'll be going back anytime soon. There isn't much left for me there.” Which might well be the understatement of the millennium.

Nil seems to catch on to the change in mood quickly, as he doesn't press any further. Instead, they sit in silence as the sun disappears, leaving the day behind. Lit torches and bowls of the town illuminate the darkness that grows by the minute, the stars burning bright in the ever so clear sky.

“Aloy approaches,” GAIA says for Elisabet's ears only and sure enough, a lone figure moves towards them from the other side of the river, nearing the bridge. The girl is carrying a bundle of ridge-wood over one shoulder, her spear held in the other hand.

With one eyebrow quirked, Aloy takes them in when she stops just under the tree's branches. “You two look cozy,” she says, an unspoken question hanging between her and Elisabet as they meet eyes. Elisabet shakes her head. *Not now.* Not while Nil is still present. The man may have proven himself a useful ally for all his strange bloodstained motivations and priorities, but in no way does that make him privy to their quiet conversations.

“Boredom lurks at the edges of the quiet,” Nil says. “Sometimes an exchange of thoughts can silence one's innermost desires.”

That's an... *interesting* way to put it. Judging by the uncomfortable grimace on Aloy's face, Elisabet senses it's far from the first time the man has used these kind of phrases.

“It's good you're finding new outlets at least,” Aloy says.
At this, the man gets to his feet, stretching out and saying, “Oh, but the blood will flow again with these new adversaries –”

Aloy groans loudly, interrupting a sentence that was sure to wind up somewhere violent. “Still creepy, Nil.”

“Right,” Elisabet says, rising from the ground as well. “I think we should head back, see what's on for dinner.”

“Petra invited us to join for a roast meal,” Aloy says, then shoots a somewhat unsure look in Nil direction.

It's hard to say if he declines for the social interaction or out of a general disinterest for joining anyone for dinner, but either way he heads back to his own camp.

Wandering along the dusty path together, Aloy is quick to come in close to Elisabet's side. “Are you okay?” she asks once there's enough distance between them and any possible lingering ears.

Her concern warms Elisabet from the inside out, and she has to stop herself from brushing away the free wisps of hair that have escaped Aloy's braids to cling to her forehead. *There it is.* In the eyes, in her voice –

She may never get the chance to introduce Aloy to the people Elisabet grew up with, but if there was somewhere, somehow a universe where they could meet, there isn't a shred of doubt that the girl would feel at home with them. A Sobeck, through and through.

“Maybe not yet, but I will be,” Elisabet says to answer Aloy's question. The relief that blooms on the girl's face at her words is like watching a flower open to the first rays of spring sun. She knows GAIA is watching over them as well, and for a moment she remembers that *this*...

This is what home feels like.
Nil leaves the next day.

He's headed north, towards the Claim and beyond, in hopes of finding more newly corrupted machines. “Alas,” he says to Aloy as he bids her farewell just outside the gate of Free Heap. “Where life brings about endings and beginnings, so do we come to another of ours. It has a bitterness to it, making the reunion only sweeter.”

Shifting her weight from one foot to another, Aloy considers the question she's about to ask. Nil is a strange fellow, and although she prefers little to no company on her quests, there's something about the thought of Nil going into the world of machines by himself, without a Focus...

They might never meet again.

“Are you sure you wouldn't rather... stick around, go to Meridian with us?” she asks and yeah, it definitely feels weird to ask him to stay.

Judging by the raised brow on Nil's face, they're in agreement on that. “Concern, Huntress, for me?” he says.

“Don't get used to it,” she adds quickly. It's only because she doesn't want to see him get himself killed following up on something that is essentially her business. If he dies in a bandits' nest, that's that, but inside a Cauldron...

“There is no need for it,” Nil says, picking up the traveling bag next to his feet, slinging it over his shoulder. “Our paths will cross again. It is the will of the Sun, you see.”

She isn't sure if it's because of something that happened before, after, or during his stay at Sunstone Rock that shaped him into becoming quite the person he is, but Nil is... something, alright.

“Go in light,” she says, hoping they are the right words. Probably not, because she only listens to the
Carja's talk of sun and light and religion with half an ear, but Nil seems to appreciate it nevertheless, giving her a small bow.

“May the dawn find you and the day warm you,” he says, and somehow he's able to infuse the phrases with a sense of grandeur, as if there's true meaning to them. “You and your mother both, Huntress.”

Aloy watches him go until she's sure he won't turn around.

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It takes another day before Elisabet deems herself well enough to travel. Aloy doesn't mind. It gives her time to prepare, and she uses it to stock up on supplies. On the day itself she finds the nearby herd and overrides two Striders, ones that look like they haven't seen too much damage so far in their existences.

Leaving the Striders at the gate, she makes her way to Petra's hut, finding both inventor and Elisabet inside, trying on different pieces of armor by the looks of it. Elisabet is positioned in the middle of the room – positioned being exactly the right word. Her arms stretched out, Petra is tying armored plates to her forearms, switching one for the other after measuring the fit.

Aloy sets her spear against the wall, hopping onto the wooden table so she can sit and wait for the women to be done. “Got the Striders.”

“Good,” Elisabet says. The moment Petra turns around to rummage through a set of vambraces, Elisabet mouths the words help me, and Aloy ducks her head to hide her smile. Even if she wanted to help out, there's no way she can stop Petra from the task she's currently fixated on.

“Just need to find the right ones,” Petra mutters behind Elisabet before she lets out a cry of aha! and turns around, triumph clear as day while she outfits Elisabet with vambraces. “You're not leaving my town without a proper Oseram set of gear.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” Elisabet says. Her eyes seem fixed on something only she can see for a moment, before Aloy's Focus notifies her of a new message.

FROM: Elisabet Sobeck
TO: Primary User
SUBJECT: (no subject)

I tried convincing her we'd be fine with our current gear.

It takes her a little longer than she'd care to admit to figure out the name Primary User referred to her – it must be the person the Focus belonged to before – but then she understands the message. Looking at Elisabet, the woman nods her head slightly towards Petra and makes a show of grimacing.

There's not much they can do except wait it out as Petra slowly but surely puts together what she calls the perfect armor. When she's done, the inventor moves a step back to look at her work, pressing her hands against the shoulder pieces to make sure they'll stay in the right spot.

“There,” Petra says, patting Elisabet's arms once more before letting her go. “Let's see them try to pierce this. Still, for a frame so unassuming, you’re made of rock and steel.”
“Comes with the territory of being flung around like a rag doll every now and again.” Taking a few steps, Elisabet stretches her arms out, moving in ways that seem to test the mobility of the armor. “It's heavy,” she comments.

Petra grins, wiping her forehead with a cloth. “Wouldn't be worth wearing it if it wasn't,” she says.

“How many shards do you want?” Aloy asks, already holding the pouch ready in her hands and doing a mental check of the wares she could trade alongside it as Petra helps Elisabet out of the armor. She knows the prices that typically come with fine grade gear, and she probably has a few Longleg hearts and lenses from a while back, ones she's held onto in case of a trade.

There's a Trampler herd north-east of the town, just beyond the scrapyard. It would set them back a day or so, but she's sure she could find something that'll pique Petra's interests...

“Keep your shards, Flame-hair,” Petra says, coming up to Aloy. She pushes the pouch back into Aloy's hands when she tries to offer them a second time. “After what you did in Meridian, I don't want to hear any of it. Besides, with the work you two handled for me here, I'd say you've more than compensated any costs.”

Even though she's pretty sure they haven't, Aloy puts away the pouch as Petra bundles the armor up and ties it down into a slightly easier to carry package.

“It's a generous gift,” Elisabet says, thanking Petra on behalf of both of them. “Are you sure there isn't some way we can repay you? For your kindness and hospitality –”

Placing the armor onto the table next to where Aloy is sitting, Petra laughs. “Hammer to steel, you are clinging on like a Glinthawk to scrap,” she says, shaking her head first at Elisabet and then Aloy. “Tell you what, how about you come visit again sometime. Bring the ol' steel round and show me how it's holding up, and after that, drinks on me.”

Elisabet leans herself against the wall as she tugs on her own boots, and Aloy can see her looking up at Petra through her lashes. “Checking the armor, eh? Sure,” she says, “but do we have drinks first or after?”

Petra pats the packaged armor with one hand, the other resting casually on her hip. “We can start at one and see how that goes.”

Stepping into her second boot, Elisabet takes a step forward to press her weight into the heel. “Not sure if we'll have enough daylight after to see to that armor.”

There's another loud, boisterous laugh from Petra, and even Aloy finds herself smiling as she pushes herself off the table. “Alright, you two,” she says, ready to excuse herself from the room and step outside when Petra interrupts her.

“The offer stands for you as well,” the inventor says. “Maybe next time I can take a closer look at that spear of yours. I see someone else has done some work on it.”

“Let me guess,” Aloy says as she picks it up. “It looks good... but you can improve it.”

The dimples in Petra's cheeks grow larger when she smiles. “A weapon is only as good as its wielder, although in this case I think the wielder could handle a little extra. I'd offer to do it now, but a beauty like that needs to be treated right. Handled with the right amount of care.”

There's something about the Oseram, especially the Oseram women, and how they manage to say a single thing that causes the entire context of a conversation to shift.
“It’s a precious kind of trust, to be handling a weapon like that for the first time,” Petra says, and yep. That’s a wink. A very deliberate wink.

As heat rises to Aloy’s cheeks, Elisabet makes her way over to the two of them. “Especially a first time,” Elisabet says, sharing a meaningful look with Petra, and –

“Okay!” Aloy says, taking another step towards the door, painfully aware of her blush, especially since the sunburn has been healing nicely and there’s no way she can play off any flushed redness under the guise of that. She points at the women. “I know what you’re doing and I’m going to see to our Striders because we’re leaving.”

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The light is already growing dim as the sun sets when they finally leave town. Waving one last time at Petra’s figure in the town’s gate, Aloy can hear her shout something about red-heads and weapons and drinking, making Aloy snort in amusement before facing forward on her Strider.

They left later than she’d hoped but it won’t be a problem. Even though temperatures are lowering they won’t need to set up camp for a few hours, precious time in which they might still come close to the bend in the river that contains a small piece of land. Aloy has it marked down in her mind as Snapmaw Island. It seemed only fitting when she first came across it on the south-western road that leads from Free Heap to Morning’s Watch.

She isn’t sure yet if they should stick to the Way of Broken Stones or pass through the Coiled Canyon. There’s something to be said for staying off the common roads, mainly not encountering as many curious or otherwise concerned travelers, but the added protection of the Carja guards...

It’s not a decision she’ll have to make tonight, and for now Aloy finds herself enjoying the freedom of the outside, not being confined by any walls, the wind in her hair and the sounds of nighttime critters filling her ears.

“Happy to be out here?” Elisabet asks her.

Holding on loosely to the Strider’s mane, Aloy nods. “Cities and towns, they’re built for keeping some people in and others out. Always feels a bit like being trapped,” she says, eliciting a laugh from Elisabet.

“Oh you would not have liked the places I’m from,” the woman says.

Having followed Elisabet’s trail across the Sundom, Sacred Land and beyond, even going into the Forbidden West, Aloy tries to imagine which places Elisabet could mean. The ruins of Faro Automated Solutions seem like a good start, so she mentions them.

“The FAS campus – that place had an actual enforced gate,” Elisabet says. “If you lived there you didn’t own a house, not like what Petra has. You got a room in a large building, and every room next to you belonged to someone else.”

It does sound mildly horrifying. “I didn’t see any of those, but the place was very high, too.” She’d kept to the ruin’s easier paths that led to Ted Faro’s office, and with time pressing she hadn’t seen any point in trying to enter the other buildings nearby. Still, if they were anything like the rooms she came across in other places, such as the Grave-Hoard and the Zero Dawn Project Facility –

Like a bigger version of the Nora lodges, and made out of metal.

“With so many people around, at some point you’re gonna run out of space. Only way to keep
building – going up.” Elisabet falls silent a moment before casting a look Aloy's way. “You've been to FAS? It's still standing, then?”

Shrugging one shoulder, Aloy lightly squeezes the sides of her Strider between her legs, feeling the machine pick up pace again as it had started to slow down a little. “More or less,” she says. “It's a... ruin. The Oseram call it Maker's End.” With a little hesitance, she adds, “It's where I first saw you and Ted Faro speak, about the Chariot line.”

“Small miracle those survived, and you'd need Alpha Access to get to those conversations,” Elisabet says. “Something you have and used to figure this whole mess out – how to deal with HADES without APOLLO to offer support on the technical aspects. Smart.”

The heat in her cheeks is back, burning hot as the sun. “It had to be done,” she says with a huff, aiming for a nonchalance she doesn't feel when Elisabet Sobeck just called her smart. Even after spending all this time with the woman, it's moments like these that remind her of what Elisabet has achieved and it makes her feel small in comparison, as if she's stepping into a larger shadow.

“Still, impressive nonetheless.”

Aloy closes her mouth and finds herself looking away from the road, searching for something to distract her from their current conversation.

It doesn't escape Elisabet, who asks, “Does hearing it fluster you? I think you're blushing.”

“No,” she says, almost shouting the word across the distance between them. The denial comes out fast, too fast. Trying to redeem herself, she stumbles over her words, saying, “It's not that I – there's no reason to –”

“Sure you're not,” Elisabet drawls. “Machine Rider Aloy, Huntress Aloy, lost for words at a reminder of her own accomplishments.”

Only because of who it's coming from.

They ride along in silence until they reach a good spot to set up camp for the night, stringing up the leather tent fabric Aloy got back in Hunter's Gathering at an angle against a large, upright rock. It'll offer some protection from the wind and any rain, but Aloy's still glad for the cloak Teb gifted them.

Sitting next to each other, their backs to stone and a small campfire going just outside the makeshift tent, Aloy rubs her hands underneath the cloak draped across their bodies. Looking out from under the cover, she can just make out their Striders, grazing higher up on the hillside. If any Snapmaws draw nearer during the course of the night, they should still be far enough apart to not incite any conflict.

The sound of her name being spoken prompts her to turn her head back to Elisabet, whom she finds looking at her, soft concern written across the woman's face. For a moment she thinks it might be something serious, but then Elisabet says, “If I'm teasing you too much, just tell me.”

It takes considerable self-control not to roll her eyes when answering, “I don't think I'm that delicate.”

“Alright, alright,” Elisabet replies with a chuckle. “Just wanted to make sure. Show me your hand?”

The quick change of topic catches her off guard before she remembers and presents the hand she cut in the scrapyard to Elisabet. It's something Elisabet insists on checking once in a while, taking off all the bandages and poking at the pink-tinged skin around the scab.
It's healing as predicted, even with its unlucky placement and the agitation it received during the fight. Applying ointment no longer burns because the wound has sealed, and although she could do it herself, she allows Elisabet to do it instead.

“You remind me of myself, sometimes,” Elisabet says as she takes care of the cut and Aloy wants to say of course because they look like each other, but then she adds, “Taking compliments like that. It's strange, isn't it, to be praised for doing things you can't imagine not doing.”

Swallowing, Aloy nods.

Even though the woman's eyes are fixed on Aloy's hand, she's able to sense a familiarity in them that matches her words. “Feels like you don't deserve all of it because you're just doing what should be done. I know,” Elisabet says softly, repeating, “I know, but it doesn't mean it's bad when someone points it out. It doesn't make your actions less meaningful. All it is, is a different person looking in and seeing the bigger picture, a reminder you could be doing anything else, but you chose to do this.”

Using fresh bandages, Elisabet re-wraps Aloy's hand, not too loose and not too tight. “A little wisdom there from my mother,” she says, the corner of her lips quirking. Despite the light tone, the words bring a heaviness to Aloy's heart when hearing Elisabet speak of the woman who, based on the data she's found, played a big role in her life.

Elisabet's mother is long gone, too. Someone Elisabet will never see again.

Her face must've given her thoughts away when Elisabet meets her eyes and the woman's smile changes, underlying grief bleeding through. “She would've liked you,” Elisabet murmurs, leaning back against the rock wall and studying Aloy, her hands resting in her lap.

Aloy can feel her own throat clog up beneath her voice, and she leaves the warmth of the cloak for a second to find one of her pouches, taking out Elisabet's globe. Shrugging the cloak back over her shoulder, she holds the artifact out to Elisabet, urging her without words to take it.

Elisabet holds the globe carefully, turning it in her hands.

Scraping her throat, Aloy says, “It's yours. I found it – should've given it back sooner.”

Humming under her breath, Elisabet continues to turn the globe slowly. “Should've remembered you've been to the ranch,” she says, and Aloy worries having handed it over will only darken their conversation, but Elisabet leans in closer, holding the globe between them. “Wanna see where that was?” she asks.

Even before Aloy is done nodding, the woman's finger travels across a big green part of the globe, saying, “Riiight... there,” when she reaches the far left of it.

There's nothing to be seen on the globe itself except for the blue and green indicators of land and water, presumably, but it feels somehow significant to be shown the location of a place she traveled to in order to find Elisabet. Where she did find Elisabet.

“Where are we now?” she asks, and before waiting for an answer she points at the other edge of the green piece. “Are we here?”

“Oh, no.” Elisabet laughs, gently taking Aloy's hand in her own and pointing her finger more inland, much closer to the spot she marked as the ranch. “I'm guessing somewhere between Wyoming, Colorado and Utah, so there.”
“Places of the Old Ones,” Aloy breathes before catching herself. Looking up from the globe she only finds mild amusement as Elisabet regards her. “Show me more places,” she says, and has the decency to blush and say please when her eager demand is met with a raised eyebrow.

Elisabet seems more than willing to comply, first speaking of things as the Walt Disney and Central Parks, as well as a building called Empire State where the highest floor was located much higher than Ted Faro's office.

At the mention of the Yellowstone Park and how it was home to many animals and beautiful sights, Aloy cries out in excitement, “I've been there!” before trying to contain herself a little. “It's where I found a song of your people.”

“You did?” Elisabet asks, and not much later they're both listening to Last Girls on Earth by Concrete Beach Party, thanks to GAIA.

When the song stops playing and Aloy tries to ask Elisabet if they had many songs alike it, the woman seems slightly stunned before hiding her face in her hands. It takes Aloy a moment to realize the shaking of her shoulders is caused by snickering, and not a deep emotional response to the song.

“Of all – of all the fucking things to survive the apocalypse, of all the musical history,” the woman says, still speaking into her hands, “this is our legacy. A Neo-Neo-Dada inspired jam condemning capitalist society.”

“So – this song wasn't something to be told to many generations?”

“No,” Elisabet chuckles. “Maybe it should've been, though. Can't deny it's a little catchy.”

They spend some more time looking at the globe, even at the other green parts of it, ones with places called Paris and France and Italy, where there once lived people who were the Old Ones to the Old Ones called Romans, a thought that dazzles Aloy with the idea of how many years must've passed since then.

She finds that she could spend hours listening to Elisabet's stories of the old world, even more so when GAIA starts showing projections of buildings and sometimes even small reconstructions of what the Old Ones' things used to look like – but Elisabet puts an end to it, saying they should get some rest.

About to make herself comfortable, she's surprised to find Elisabet's globe presented to her.

“Here,” Elisabet says. “You hold on to it. Finders keepers, after all.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, but upon receiving a nod takes the artifact from the woman and carefully stows it away into the pouch it belongs.

“You've kept it safe so far,” Elisabet tells her when she lies down again. “I'm giving it to you. Think you're the right person to have it.”

Feeling her face grow hot once again, Aloy finds that she doesn't mind it that much, and not just because it's too dark to see at the moment. “Thank you,” she says, and silently vows to guard it, perhaps even more so than before. After that, it doesn't take long to fall asleep.
As it turns out, Primary User isn't yet another strange name of the Old Ones, and neither is Montana Recreations – although Aloy already had her doubts about that particular one.

When Elisabet calms down enough to speak again, saying *I'm not laughing at you and just caught me off guard is all*, the woman explains how the Old Ones had different users for certain technology, and each user represented a person. Primary User only meant to signify the person who used a Focus *primarily*.

It's very similar to how Sylens and Aloy distinguished Focus-wearing Carja as, well, Focus users. Aloy wouldn't even be able to blame Elisabet for laughing at her oversight because now that it's been explained, it's impossible to imagine the words being used in a different sense.

“Can't believe I didn't realize that,” she mutters half to herself as they enter the small room they paid for to stay the night at Morning's Watch. The cost for their stay is high, all things considered, but the road leading to Meridian and the Spire is long and comforts are spread far and wide in between.

The room even has a window, high along the outside wall.

“It's not that bad,” Elisabet says, setting the baggage she's carrying down by the foot of what will be her bed. “Trust me, even for people who were born surrounded by the technology, some of it could be very challenging.”

Pushing a hand into the pillow as she sits onto the other bed, Aloy tries to determine whether it'll be better to sleep with or without it. “Doesn't help that all your names are confusing too,” she says. “Ted, that's an okay name, even if it belonged to a Strider-herder. Or Aaron, or Tom, but Patrick? I can't even pronounce the second part half the time …”

“Brochard-Klein,” Elisabet says, having come to sit across her. “And Ted was short for Theodore.”

“That's what I mean,” Aloy says, throwing the pillow down the side of the bed. “Aluki, Ikrie, Tulemak – even Banuk names make more sense.”

“It's a shame I can't remember Picasso's full name right now. I don't suppose you've got it stored somewhere, do you, GAIA?”

For both of them, their Focus devices glow as GAIA joins their conversation. “Unfortunately, I do
not,” the AI says. “However I am able to recall Pablo Picasso was a Spanish painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramicist, stage designer, poet and playwright who lived during the 20th century as an influential artist.”

Many of the terms GAIA uses bring nothing to mind when Aloy tries to imagine them, but she knows painters, poets, and sculptors. “What did she do? Paint people's songs for them?”

“I'm afraid Pablo was a man,” Elisabet says.

Aloy throws herself back onto the bed with a groan. “Like I said! It’s confusing.”

“So what’s a Strider-herder, then?” she hears Elisabet ask. “Sounds cute to me. How do you herd Striders?”

“You don't.” Aloy thinks back to every time Rost warned her against doing pointless things. No one is able to herd Striders with the exception of other machines, like Watchers, or someone with an override. “It means you're pretending to do something when you're clearly not, and it'll get you killed.”

When she looks over to Elisabet she finds the woman half nodding her head. “That's... awfully apt and specific. Let's uh... take a look at your Focus, shall we?”

Changing the name from Primary User to Aloy is surprisingly simple, even more so with GAIA’s instantaneous help. She only has to take it off for a moment in which GAIA alters the name, and, as soon as she's wearing it again, looks through her data to find anything addressed to her is titled TO: Aloy. For such a small change, she can't help but feel pleased with it.

With the sun setting, the room grows darker until a Carja woman stops by to light the lamps hanging from the wall next to the door. They still have enough food to last a few days, and Elisabet insists on a smaller portion than Aloy, saying she doesn't need as much anyway.

“Where does your name come from, Aloy?” the woman asks while Aloy chews on a dried fig. “Are you named after a crafting material or...”

She shakes her head, remembering what Rost told her about the Naming Ritual. “Usually there's a crowd that gathers on the outlook of All-Mother mountain, but for me it was Rost and Teersa. Then, when the sun rises, your name is declared and... if it's a good name, they say the Goddess will speak it back.”

“Was yours?”

Even now, after so long, she can still faintly remember the proud look Rost would have every time he recounted the event. The Goddess spoke it back, he'd say. Many times. It's a sign She's looking out for you, Aloy.

“It had more than four echoes,” she says to Elisabet. “The Nora consider that a good sign.”

She was never sure what to make of it herself. After all, if the Goddess was looking out for her, why was she still an outcast without a mother? Then later, after finding out the truth about GAIA and All-Mother mountain, it felt even more pointless.

Swallowing back the fig, Aloy reaches for the bread next. “And yours?” she asks as she tears the piece in two, offering one to Elisabet.

The woman accepts the bread, but keeps it in her hands as she stares at the wall opposite her. “It's a...
family name. There were more than a few women in my family called Elisabet, although most of them went by shortened versions of it, like Beth or Ellie.” Crumbling one of the edges of the bread, Elisabet's gaze drops to her hands, but Aloy can tell she isn't really seeing anything. “My mother preferred the full name. Sometimes she'd even call me by the original version of it, Elisheva, but... I never told anyone else about that.”

She mentally compares the two names, Elisabet and Elisheva. The way Elisabet said it sounded softer, kinder than the name she goes by, with a warmth to it that's hard to put into words.

“I won't use it then,” Aloy says.

In a trick of the light Elisabet's eyes appear almost damp when she looks at Aloy, nodding her thanks. “Anyway, it means God's promise or oath of my God, something people liked to remind me of, but I was never very religious.”

“And Sobeck?”

Her question seems to snap Elisabet out of the almost fragile look she was carrying. “Oh, that's a surname,” she says, and something on Aloy's face must’ve given away that she has no idea what a surname is. “It's a name that every member of a family carries alongside their own.”

“So your mother...”

Elisabet nods. “She was a Sobeck, too.”

It's different from the Oseram's bynames, but sounds similar to some of the Carja names Aloy's encountered, like Talanah and her family's house name. The thought strikes her that if she'd been born to a different tribe, her name would have been completely different as well, and she isn't sure how to feel about that.

Thankfully, before she can delve too deep into the idea of what her other names could have been, Elisabet continues talking.

“Sobeck was derived from the name of an Egyptian – an ancient – god, one with the body of a man and the face of a... a Snapmaw,” she says. “They say he was a god of fertility and healing, and featured in a lot of creation stories, but then he was also known as he who loves robbery and pointed teeth, so I’d uh... not take it all too seriously.”

Aloy remembers the very first conversation she ever had with a Carja Sun-Priest who claimed their sun-god had to be a man. She huffs. “Your name means promise of a male Snapmaw god. That better be one good promise then. Didn't the Old Ones have any female gods to name their children after?”

It dawns on her that maybe she shouldn't have practically insulted a name that was given to Elisabet by a woman she loved dearly, and she freezes in her movements, checking Elisabet's face from the corner of her eye. She catches the moment a small smile creeps onto the woman's face.

“My mother always said God was without gender, and I –” Elisabet pauses, listening to something only she can hear. “Go ahead, GAIA.”

The room lights up with the purple framework of her Focus, and GAIA says, “Forgive my intrusion. I received a signal from a Focus unit approximately 17.1 seconds ago, originating from a location in close range to the Utah Spire. It appears to be an attempt at establishing communications.”

“Patch them through, GAIA,” Elisabet says. “Let's see who we're dealing with.”
At first nothing happens, but then distorted lines of a holo image appear, shifting erratically in a way that makes it impossible to see the other person. “I don’t think it’s working,” a man’s voice says, one that sounds familiar to Aloy.

“Maybe if you touch the round shape again,” a second, even more familiar voice says before the image clears and Aloy finds herself looking at the holo-forms of Erend and Avad, both wearing a Focus.

“It’s Aloy!” Erend cries in surprise before apparently remembering he’s standing next to the Sun-King and shuffling on his feet, tucking his arms away behind his back. “And another woman. As you can see, obviously,” he adds.

“Can they hear us?” Avad asks, looking up at Erend as he’s currently sitting down on something – Aloy’s best guess is one of the cushioned couches on the terrace. Without the royal crown on his head, Avad looks slightly younger than usual.

“Yes, we can,” Aloy says, and waits for both of the men to turn their heads to face her.

“Aloy!” Avad says in greeting. “These light scroll devices are truly magnificent! I do hope we are not disturbing you and your companion.”

Next to her she notices Elisabet placing the piece of bread Aloy gave her back onto the cloth with food between them, brushing away some of the crumbs. When she looks over to the woman, she receives a dismissive hand gesture and a nod towards the holo-image floating before them.

“You found another Focus,” Aloy says to the men, and it’s Erend who nods in agreement.

“Never thought I’d be wearing one of these,” the Oseram says. “If I had known... maybe I would’ve tried to find one sooner.”

For a moment she imagines making a quip about the Focus to see if he doesn’t feel it looks strange on his own face, but that train of thought leads back to Olin and the Proving, so she doesn’t. She waits for one of them to speak again, and this time it’s Avad.

“As indebted as the Sundom is to you, Meridian asks – I ask – that you might return in order to assist us,” the Sun-King says with a grave expression. There’s a slight pause wherein the king looks to Erend, who nods.

Before Avad speaks again, Aloy can already feel what his words will be – there’s only one reason why they would come to her, one field of expertise either man would not be sure of how to approach.

“We fear the Demon may be planning another attack.”

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It’ll take them a week to reach Meridian, a period of time Avad has agreed to, saying she’ll be greeted at the gates and escorted to the palace immediately upon arrival.

They might make it there sooner. Traveling with Elisabet – at first it seemed she’d have to adapt, that the woman required more rest and comfort than Aloy ever gave herself, but the very next time they come across an inn and Aloy sets out to count her shards, Elisabet stops her.

That night they sleep on the ground, under the open sky, looking up at the many stars above. Elisabet tells her about them, how the sun is a star as well.
Not too long ago, Aloy would have preferred the quiet rush of nature to accompany her during her travels over any other sound, but now she finds herself drawn to Elisabet's voice whenever she speaks. Most hours still pass without either of them saying a word, but more and more often she's the one to start a conversation, to ask Elisabet about the Old Ones or the world around them.

The Way of Broken Stones is safe and dull in the most pleasant of ways compared to other roads, and they only change course slightly once they reach the edge of the Thunderjaw's territory – the one that guards where the road splits in two, one path to Meridian, one to Cut-Cliffs. Some Carja soldiers say the machine has been restless of late.

So they take the smaller path down, the one that leads into a canyon where bandits gather from time to time still. It sets her on edge, but given the choice she'd rather plant a few arrows into the bodies of bandits than run from a Thunderjaw's tail.

When night falls and they haven't come across a place Aloy deems safe enough to rest for a few hours, Elisabet gives her the option to join her on Elisabet's Strider and close her eyes a moment.

There are a thousand reasons on her mind that warn her, that she must stay awake, but when Aloy brings up the danger of bandits, Elisabet points to her Focus and GAIA joins in, saying they will both keep an eye out. The floating, tired feeling at the back of her neck pushes against the rest of her body until she caves.

It isn't the same kind of rest sleep brings, but by leaning her head on Elisabet's back and closing her eyes, Aloy finds herself drifting off for short moments at a time, the landscape changing every time she opens her eyes again.

In the span of one of these moments, the sun starts rising and blue light greets Aloy, causing her to blink a few times as her vision adjusts to daybreak. Her arms are still wrapped loosely around Elisabet's waist, and with her ear pressed against the woman's back she can hear the faint hum of a melody resonating within her chest.

Her own Strider is walking besides them and it raises its head, glowing eyes taking her in before going back to the task at hand. The pace they're going is slow, a sign Elisabet's Strider is starting to struggle under the combined weight.

She should switch back to her own mount.

Instead, Aloy listens to the hummed melody inside Elisabet's chest, feigning sleep a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, it's a short transitional chapter... but the next two chapters will both be around 4500 words long (double the length of this one~) and they'll arrive in Meridian, so I hope that makes up for it! (And I still hope you all enjoyed this chapter c':)

Thank you all for reading and till next time! <3
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I know the update is a liiiittle later than usual but real life happened for both me and burbear, so here it is a little belatedly.

I'm also posting this before answering your wonderful comments (which I all adore), I'm so sorry about that, but my brother is in surgery as I type (nothing life threatening or disease related - the good kind of surgery) and I'll of course be visiting him later on today which would otherwise delay my posting of this chapter with another day or so. I will answer comments as soon as I am able!

I really hope you'll all enjoy this chapter and the ones to come! Thank you for still being here and reading it <3

EDIT: my brother is doing well! He's already on his way home again for further recovery. Thank you everyone for the good wishes :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The eastern road leading into Meridian has stayed mostly untouched by the violence that brought HADES to the Spire. From the angle they're approaching the city appears the way it does in most of Aloy's memories – grand, busy, sunlight hitting the red rooftops from afar and showering the city in a golden glow.

She only need look to her left to see what the destruction has left behind, even after all these months. The Maizelands, fields scarce with crops, and the village, half in ruins still. It's impossible to tell if the elevators are back in working order, but Aloy imagines those to have been a priority after the battle. The Spire, the older buildings at its foot crumbled down even further into rubble, the holes in the path leading up along the rockwall filled with wooden walkways and supports.

Elisabet doesn't say anything as she watches the Spire, but she doesn’t have to for Aloy to understand what she might be feeling – the quiet awe in her eyes.

As they approach the bridge and leave their Striders behind, Aloy finds they have to push their way through merchants and travelers alike, all being held up by the Carja guards. If anything, the security seems to have increased since her last visit.

Some of the merchants are making use of the hold up to showcase their wares, offering items to the travelers for prices that make Aloy scoff. A woman tries to interest them in buying a Carja silk scarf to protect themselves from the heat (“And cold during our winter!” the merchant quickly added) at the price of two hundred shards.

Aloy stifles the need to tell the merchant she'll be back in two hundred years and maybe then she'll see about buying it.

It's only when she starts getting closer to the guards at the front that she notices the hush that's befallen the crowd, the not-quite whispers of the Nora girl and she's back following her. She regrets not informing Avad of their early arrival as any hopes of a quiet entrance leave the realm of
“The Sun-King is expecting me,” Aloy says to the tallest guard who stands at attention in her presence.

“I will alert the Vanguard of your early arrival at once –” the guard tries to say, but it'll take too long. Aloy steps forward, and even though she doesn't come up to the man's shoulders in height, she can feel him shrinking back. “Or,” she says, stressing her words, “you can take me inside the city and I'll find the Vanguard myself.”

The whispers behind her back grow louder as more people stop and stare. *It's her*, they say. *The Sun's favored, she's the one who stopped the Demon*. Their words crawl under her skin, spreading their itch until her hands feel too empty, ready to hold something to push them all back, to create distance –

The guard hesitates. Aloy can see his gaze flicker in the shadows of his helmet, from her to Elisabet and back.

“She's with me,” Aloy says, and Elisabet takes the necessary steps to stand next to her, as if given a cue. Lowering her voice, Aloy leans in until she can see the whites of the guard's eyes. “Either you escort us in, or I will tell the Sun-King you let us wait out here in the sun after a long journey, and I'll be there when he asks you to explain yourself.”

There's a degree of unfairness to her strategy, one that rests on a *he said, she said* situation where they both know she'd hold the upper hand, but nothing inside her feels regret when the Carja guard turns and gestures at her and Elisabet to follow him, leading them across the bridge.

Before they reach the halfway point of the bridge, there's a particularly loud yell from the merchants' side, followed by a cheered “Our Savior, Aloy!” and she can't stop herself from flinching at the sound. She squares her jaw and keeps walking, making sure not to look to Elisabet because she knows the woman is watching her.

Part of her tries to convince herself that it was unavoidable, that most people will look at her and only see an outcast, a savage, a savior, and she should come to terms with it, accept it as is, but every fiber of her body rejects the thought, rejects their misplaced reverence. They only want her because she fits their stories, because she can fill a place they don't want to fill themselves.

The Carja guard tells them to wait at the fountain, and for a moment Elisabet seems to resign herself to actually waiting – that is, until the guard has turned a corner and Aloy reaches out for Elisabet's wrist, tugging her along into the narrow streets and alleys of Meridian.

Aloy knows they make quite the sight when they stop in front of the guardsmen who protect the bridge to the palace – two red-headed women wearing Nora garb and Oseram steel, unwashed, hair full of wind and sand – but they know who she is, and after confirming that Elisabet is with her, they let them pass.

A breathless Marad meets them at the foot of the stairs leading up to the throne, saying, “Your arrival –”

Taking in the long line of Carja citizens waiting their turn on the steps to the throne, Aloy interrupts the man. “Early, I know,” she says. “We're here now.”

“Yes.” Eyeing them with the weariness of a man used to the hectic flow of life in Meridian and the palace, Marad gestures for them to follow him up along the other stairway, the one reserved for
people leaving their audience with the king.

As they ascend, Aloy finds herself looking to the throne where Avad is sitting, speaking to a nobleman. For a second their eyes meet, and Avad gives her a slow nod before returning his attention to his subject.

Marad leads them down the stairs at the edge of the terrace, into the halls beneath. Fire illuminates the stone walls, adding to the general sense of warmth. They enter a wider hallway through a pair of ornamented wooden doors held open for them by two Carja servants, both dressed in fine silks and cottons.

The grandeur of the hallway feeds the impression that they've been smuggled inside through the back door, as here the walls are decorated with colorful displays made from thousands of bright shards and stones – mosaics that speak for months of labor. The lights placed between the pictures are contained by finely crafted casings from metal, maybe even made by Oseram hands from the looks of it.

Marad takes them along the carpeted orange stripe running through the middle of the hall to one of the many doors lined up on the left wall. This time, there aren't any servants standing in wait, and Marad pushes the double doors open himself before stepping to the side, giving Aloy and Elisabet ample space to enter the room.

“While the Sun-King cannot see you right away, he extends his hospitality to you, so that you may regain your strength after your journey,” Marad says with a short bow, gesturing into the middle of the room.

With daylight and fresh air streaming in through long slits in the stone walls, filtered through a metal patterned roster, the center of the room is highlighted, a low table filled with a small feast of fruit on platters set out for them. The pillows surrounding the table are of different sizes but all are of exceptional make, soft spun fabrics that glisten ever so slightly where the light hits them.

As if those comforts weren't enough, Aloy sees the bed next, off to the side, a canopy of silk above it moving like leaves in a breeze. She sets down her weapons against the wall, freeing her hands from all possessions. A quick glance over her shoulder confirms that Elisabet and Marad are talking, and Aloy makes use of the moment to reach out and touch the silk.

It's thinner than anything she's ever seen on a merchant's stall, and it feels like touching nothing at all. She catches the tail of the conversation Elisabet and Marad are having when she hears the woman say, “Dr. Sobeck, Elisabet Sobeck.”

“If you would follow me, please, then I would show you to your room,” Marad says and – what?

Aloy spins around, her movement catching Marad's attention. “I thought this was our room,” she says, stepping down from the plateau where the bed rests on, using one arm to point out the decadence, the space that can fit an entire Nora family with ease.

With the patience becoming a man who regularly handles questions of various natures, Marad nods. “This is your room, Aloy,” he says. “To ensure all comforts are met, the Sun-King has many rooms to offer his guests. I realize this might be different from the Nora customs...”

Unease settles in the pit of Aloy's stomach at the thought of being split up. It must be visible as the lines on Marad's face soften.

“The Sun-King demanded your mother's room be next to yours,” he says, but Elisabet steps in closer to Aloy right when the adviser was about to speak again, to no doubt add another well-meant remark.
to soften the court's rules.

“We'll be staying in this room, thank you,” Elisabet says and although her tone is friendly enough, it's clear she won't take no for an answer, and Marad's tight-lipped smile confirms that he recognizes it, too.

“Should the two of you find yourselves in need of anything, you may pull on this rope,” Marad says, gesturing a thick cord that hangs from the ceiling next to the door, several strands of orange and yellow fiber spun into it. “It will alert a member of the court and they will come to you. If you do not have any questions for me, I will take my leave and someone will be along shortly to assist you to the warm baths.”

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When the Carja say assist they mean so in every sense of the word.

They barely have any time to sit before they are whisked away deeper underground by a young Carja who introduces herself as Udina, who isn't a slave – it's the first thing that comes to mind when Aloy thinks of servants – but rather a nobleman's daughter who works in the Sun-King's court to attend to guests.

She takes them to a room with stone seats along three sides of it, and various slots hewn into the walls above the seats. Most of them are empty, with the exception of a few that seem to hold personal belongings and clothes.

“The Sun-King abolished slavery right at the start of his reign, so any of us you see are here by choice,” Udina says, her chipper voice distracting Aloy from the fact that she's skillfully undoing Aloy's armor until suddenly she's missing both vambraces and a shoulder piece.

“Woah there,” Aloy says when Udina starts tugging on her belt. “I don't need someone to undress me.”

“Of course,” Udina chirps, moving over to Elisabet, who refuses her help as well. “We do not often receive Nora guests, and I will try to adjust according to your needs. Would you require my help in any of the next rooms?”

Apparently when the Carja take baths, they need different rooms for it – one to undress, one where the air is warmed and copper basins filled with water are available to wash one's body with before actually entering any baths. One where the air is warm but the bath is cold, one where the air is hot and the bath is hot (“Why?” Aloy asks, shaking off her water-dipped toes. “Isn't Meridian hot enough as it is?”), one Aloy walks past completely, and finally, a large round room with a bath that fills it almost completely, like a very small lake.

Wrapped in a large orange cloth, Aloy walks to the stone edge of the bath, testing out the waters with her toes again. She hums, pleased to find the water a pleasant temperature for once, before dropping the cloth on the bath's edge and sinking down into it.

The stone seat pushed against the bath's inner walls is at the perfect height where Aloy can sit on it, brush her toes against the actual bottom of the bath and have the waterline lap against her clavicle. The water smells faintly of a spice or herb she can't place, something sweet with a tang to it, like freshly picked Ochrebloom. She can feel her muscles relax, the warm water drawing out the tension and stiffness left in her body.

Elisabet enters the room, wearing a deep blue cloth around her body similar to the one Udina has
given Aloy. She walks around the bath's edge until she reaches Aloy and sits down, resting her lower legs in the water. “Apparently,” she says, gently moving her feet back and forth, “there are separate baths for men and women, and even one made specifically for the king himself.”

Aloy finds herself shaking her head at the thought. “Waste of space.” While she can't deny the pleasure that accompanies submerging her entire body in warm water, it's still an unnecessary luxury, especially when dedicating what feels like an entire floor of the palace to baths only.

“Humans like their baths,” Elisabet says. “Regardless of the loss of APOLLO, it seems this is a universal truth, tested time and again.”

Aloy lifts her cupped hand from the water, letting the liquid fall back down with a clatter as she turns her hand. “You mean, the Old Ones had these too?” she asks. “I thought you had showers.”

“Almost everyone had at least a shower,” Elisabet says, touching her Focus with one hand. They decided not to take them off in the dressing room, not willing to risk losing them. “GAIA should have some information on... maybe not. Can you show us a swimming pool, GAIA?”

Aloy's Focus lights up the room with a purple hue as GAIA joins them. “While I am unable to access all architectural data, I am able to show a rough model of a swimming pool,” the AI says, and a rectangular shape appears, its holo-form slowly turning around.

“Add a human figure for scale?” Elisabet says, and the moment after a small, purple human shape appears next to the rectangle. Aloy feels her jaw go slack when she mentally compares the sizes – the bath she's currently in would fit numerous times in the rectangle.

“All of that – filled with water, for bathing?” she asks, and Elisabet nods.

“And swimming, more accurately,” the woman adds. “There were buildings dedicated to them, having more than two of these pools in them.”

Ridiculous. Aloy considers if she'd ever be able to find one of those buildings and what it would look like now compared to the other ruins she's found. Would it be a pit in the ground, or would it still – again? – be filled with water?

Approaching footsteps prompt her to dispel the Focus' image, and Udina enters the bath chamber, carrying a bronze tray with a colorful pitcher and matching cups on top. She makes her way over to them, setting the tray down between Aloy and Elisabet, on the bath's edge.

“Is the water not to your liking?” she asks Elisabet while filling one of the cups with water. Up close, Aloy can see sliced fruit drifting on the water still inside the pitcher, and wonders what good it'll do. Elisabet shakes her head in reply before being handed the cup by Udina. “It's lovely, but I prefer to stay where I am,” she says, and Aloy understands why. The blue cloth covers most of Elisabet's skin, including the parts that show ports and openings that would reveal her true nature. She distantly remembers Elisabet mentioning being waterproof, as are their Focus devices, but that function does nothing to protect from prying eyes.

“As long as the experience is enjoyable,” Udina says cheerfully, drawing a laugh from Elisabet. Next she fills the other cup and hands it to Aloy. “Would you like me to wash your hair? We have many different oils that can be applied to smooth out unwanted textures or add softness to the hair...”

As Udina trails off by mentioning said different oils and mixtures it becomes clear that's another
divide in Carja and Nora culture, and Aloy is about to refuse her offer when she feels Elisabet's toes nudge her elbow under water.

“Go for it,” Elisabet says. “What's the harm? Maybe you'll like it.”

Still, Aloy hesitates. The thought of someone else touching her hair... but Udina seems nice. Judging by the way she moves and talks, she must've done all this a thousand times, and Aloy finds herself nodding slowly. “But I'll undo my braids,” she says, and Udina agrees enthusiastically before excusing herself a moment.

“Can't believe I'm doing this,” Aloy mutters as she picks apart her braids, handing each bead from it to Elisabet for safekeeping.

Taking another bead from her, Elisabet makes a soft sound before saying, “The Nora are very private people, aren't they?”

“I'm not Nora,” Aloy says, the words falling from her mouth quick as rain. She wonders if Elisabet will comment on it, on how fast she is to denounce any familiarity binding her to the people in whose territory she grew up in – whose rules dictated a better part of her life.

She finds Elisabet looking at her, studying her face with a calm expression. “No, you are not,” she says. There's something else she wants to say it seems, but the words never come as Udina returns with two other servant girls carrying a large copper bowl filled with water.

All Aloy has to do is sit back and let Udina move all her hair as she pleases, first brushing it with a touch so gentle Aloy sometimes questions if she's doing anything at all. After that, Udina slowly submerges her hair in the bowl, adding different potions to the water but not before letting Aloy approve them by smell.

With her head leaned back, there's very little Aloy can do but wait until Udina is done. She glances at Elisabet and finds the woman quietly picking up some of Udina's bottles and uncapping them. Udina herself is chattering away, telling them all sorts of things about the palace and the reconstruction efforts, the feast that will be held later today for the nobles, the possibility of a royal wedding lurking on the horizon...

*Hang on.*

Forgetting for a moment she's supposed to stay still, Aloy sits up and turns her head to face Udina. “Avad will be married?” she asks before listening to the distressed noises Udina makes as she attempts to lead Aloy back to sitting with her head rested against the bowl.

“We don't imagine Prince Itamen is quite ready for that kind of commitment,” Udina says in a joking manner as she massages some kind of ointment into the roots of Aloy's hair. Leaning in ever so slightly she continues to speak in a stage whisper. “There are rumors in the palace, and it would be high time, too.”

Aloy can't stop herself from saying, “I thought he was... indisposed.” After Ersa and after his proposal to Aloy to join him as his right hand... At the end of that conversation, he had admitted he'd need time to think on matters. Even though time has passed, to hear there might be someone else who will fill the void that Ersa left behind is a strange revelation.

“Oh, never to speak ill of His Radiance, but the rumors say his betrothed will be a Khane, a great relief to us all,” Udina says.

Talanah comes to mind, a picture of wildfire, fierce and uncontrollable. The thought of her, or
anyone like her, becoming the Queen Consort is... strange, but Aloy finds herself agreeable to the idea. Besides, it would fit in with the pattern of women Avad seems to gravitate towards.

Setting down another small bottle, Elisbet says, “It must be because I'm a foreigner, but I'm not sure I understand the significance of that. Could you explain it to me?”

Udina is more than happy to. “The Khane families are considered royalty among nobility,” she says. “All of them have a direct line of descent from the very first Carja who came to Meridian with our first Sun-King, Radiant Araman. They did not doubt the knowledge Radiant Araman found in the Leaves that led them to Meridian.”

Aloy remembers reading something about that, how Araman found knowledge left behind by the Old Ones and studied it, even being the first Carja to read and write. She can imagine the members of his tribe who did not shun him for it, who followed him to Meridian, to be rewarded later on for their loyalty, although to gain the status of royalty among nobility does seem a bit much.

Then again, most Carja things are like that.

After Udina is done rinsing Aloy's hair she gently removes any excess water from the hair by pressing it inside a dry cloth, and then pinning all of her hair to the top of her head using wooden pins, even going as far as instructing her not to touch the hair until she's fully dressed again.

Udina leaves, but not before telling them through which door to exit the bath chamber and where they'll find clean clothes (she assures them their own clothes will be washed with utmost care, but Aloy feels annoyed hearing it nonetheless) and further assistance, if they'd like some.

Ignoring Udina's instructions, Aloy reaches up to touch the rolls of pinned hair on her head, and Elisabet 'tries' to swat away her hands until she moves just out of her reach. “It's my hair, I'll do what I want with it,” Aloy says, but there's no real fire in her voice, just as Elisabet wasn't really trying to stop her.

“I'm sure she'll re-pin it if you mess it up,” Elisabet says in a sing-song manner.

Aloy scoffs, but stops touching her hair. “She can try.”

Making their way to the second dressing room, Aloy finds herself looking for clothes to wear until Elisabet points out a neat pile of Carja silks and cottons.

“No,” she whispers to herself, touching the delicate fabrics. “There's no armor.”

While Elisabet towels herself off and starts putting on the Carja clothes, Aloy tries to find anything – anything – different to wear, something that will offer more protection, but the only things she comes across are Carja ornaments, jewelry made out of machine parts.

“It's not that bad,” Elisabet says while wearing a deep blue skirt with sashes that flows down to her ankles, a golden pattern adorning the fabric. The upper part of her body is covered in a halter top that is much the same deep blue, a broad golden belt wrapped around her waist. Her bare shoulders are wrapped in see-through Carja silk that has a much lighter blue sheen to it, like the sky at midday.

It's beautiful, Aloy supposes, but the thought of having to wear it herself makes her stomach clench, discomfort running through every inch of her being.

Udina announces herself with a knock on the door before entering, and she seems surprised to see only Elisabet dressed and Aloy still wearing the orange cloth, but it turns out her eyes can grow even larger when Aloy steps up to her, gesturing Elisabet and saying she isn't going to wear that.
“We can alter the clothes,” Udina says once she's regained her composure, crouching next to Elisabet and pinching her fingers along the fabric of the skirt, holding them at mid-calf. “Would you prefer this length?”

“No skirt,” Aloy says, and Udina's eyes go wide again. “No sashes. I want something I can move in, not this... display.”

“Of course,” Udina says, nodding her head quickly. She stands, taking a moment to turn to Elisabet and ask if the clothing's to her liking, to which Elisabet agrees. Moving just slow enough to not be considered rushing, Udina leaves the room again, pulling the door shut behind her.

Aloy paces down the room, hesitates a moment before meeting Elisabet's eyes and saying, “It looks good on you,” because it does. The blue seems to brighten the redness of her hair, and for all it's impracticality, it would be hard even for Aloy to distinguish Elisabet from the fashionable nobles of Meridian. The only thing missing is the jewelry, which was probably why Udina came back in the first place – to help them finish up.

Elisabet smiles, sitting down on a stone seat while they wait. “It's not you, though,” she says, and Aloy laughs, half in surprise.

No, it's definitely not her.

“Is... is it you?” she asks, because the realization hits her that so far, she's only seen Elisabet wearing either facility clothes or garments she's picked.

“I'm not uncomfortable,” Elisabet says, which seems about right. “It's not what I would wear regularly, but going up to a merchant and asking them for my kind of clothes... I don't think that would work.”

Probably not but... perhaps they should try. Normal clothes are less expensive than armor and, doing a mental count of her shards, she has enough to...

The door opens behind her, and for a moment she expects Udina's lilting voice to speak but instead she comes face to face with a very familiar spy wearing the same garments as she did in Sunfall, only in different, brighter colors.

“Freckles!” Vanasha cries in delight, closing the door behind her and placing a bundle of fabric down onto the stone seat. With both her hands free, the woman reaches for Aloy's shoulders. “Let me take a good look at you, I can't believe it's been so long!”

She finds herself grinning as Vanasha studies her face. It has been long, not having seen each other since after the battle for the Spire. “You're still here,” she says.

“Of course,” Vanasha says. “For now, at least. I heard you were giving Udina a hard time, but I have just the thing for you.”

Glancing at the pile Vanasha brought with her, Aloy is relieved to see a few hardened shoulder pieces lying on top. “I hope so,” she says, and Vanasha's smile reminds her of a fox, playful and predatory at the same time.

“Oh, you'll love it.”

Chapter End Notes
They're finally in Meridian I am so excited :D Honestly, I thought they'd be back in the Sundom by chapter 18 but SHOWS WHAT I KNOW ABOUT WRITING MY OWN FIC LMFAO

See y'all next time~
Hi everyone! So this is the last update of the year - after this burbear and I will take the holidays off to visit our families and spend time with them (although I'll definitely be writing too c: ). I really hope you're all still enjoying the story. My Meridian chapters seem to be on the long side, but then again there's so much I want to let Elisabet and Aloy explore, so many characters I want them to meet.

So much love to burbear, who is STILL helping me out with all these months. I love you, pal. You're too good to me. And a special mention to CZGoldEdition for letting me ramble at her as well. Je bent een schat! <3 Honestly you two both mean a lot to me and I am so glad you haven't grown sick of me and this story XD

And of course... the biggest of thankyou's to you all, the people who read my story. You are wonderful. Thank you so much for giving me those moments of your time. <3

Next update will be on the seventh of January, 2018. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The outfit Aloy ends up wearing is one made for a Hawk, to be worn during times of celebration. The armored parts are decorated with paints, and like most Carja armor it is designed to show off one's body, leaving her stomach exposed. Impractical, but at least she can move.

After leaving the baths, she and Elisabet are given time to properly eat back in their room, and Aloy makes use of the momentary freedom to braid her hair. Udina had offered to give her a proper Carja hairstyle – Aloy had given her a proper no. The washing and clothes were more than enough Carja madness for one day.

“I need to see the Spire up close,” Elisabet says while Aloy finishes one of her last braids. The woman's been using her Focus for the past few minutes, barely touching the food prepared for them.

Slipping the final bead in place, Aloy frowns. “Avad said the new machines were drawn to it.”

“And there must be a reason for that,” Elisabet says, finishing Aloy's thought. “It's the closest we have to a lead on MINERVA... and I don't think we're the only ones looking.”

It's a possibility they've considered before – that whoever was behind the attack on Free Heap will be looking for the remaining sub-functions as much as they will. They're still in the advantage, even without knowing who their assailants are, because they have the one thing the other side lacks.

The key.

As much as she hates it, hates how her usefulness has been the only thing saving her from dire situations before, it does bring relief knowing their unseen enemy doesn't have access to the most crucial of information. They can't have – otherwise the Spire would already have been lost.

“Our audience with the king, after the feast...”
“Should make use of it,” Aloy says. “Hear him out, then make a proposal. He'll listen. He's listened before.”

She remembers his willingness to help, mud on their knees, bloodstained arms and whispered confessions of a past branded by violence and wrongdoings.

Elisabet nods, her gaze staring ahead in thought. “Good,” she says, “good. That should help, having a king on our side.”

A knock on the door precedes Udina's entry, and their appointed handmaid ushers them along with her to one of the towers next to the Solarium. Inside, Udina makes Aloy go up the spiral staircase by herself, while she and Elisabet will wait for her.

The thought arises to tell Udina if someone wants to discuss something with her, they can do it in front of Elisabet, too – but catching Elisabet's eyes, the woman dips her chin ever so slightly, giving her approval, and Aloy straightens her shoulders before the climb.

The reason for secrecy becomes clear when she opens the wooden door on the landing, finding a study behind it with Marad and Vanasha leaning over a desk. They are both watching her without so much as moving their heads until Marad rises, standing to his full height.

“Yes, this will do,” he says as he takes in her outfit, folding his hands behind his back. “Please close the door, Aloy. There is a matter we need to consider... with the three of us.”

She fulfills Marad's request, and the adviser flanks her as she steps further into the room. Aloy plants her feet steady onto the stone floor. She notices the uncharacteristic silence from Vanasha, and finds the woman's gaze a steady aim in Marad's direction.

“You've asked for my presence,” Aloy says, keeping her body still despite the attention being given to her – being watched like livestock. “That means you want me to fix something.”

“Keen,” Marad says, having moved just behind her right shoulder. “Indeed, Aloy, we find ourselves with a situation, one you might assist in.”

It's either a machine problem or a people problem and based off of their secrecy Aloy is willing to wager it being the latter. Humans are complicated, machines are not. Fighting a machine like a Stormbird or Thunderjaw or even a Fireclaw is tougher – much tougher – but never are there secondary motives to consider beyond hunt and kill and survive.

Marad is still hovering over her shoulder, just out of sight. Aloy won't give him the satisfaction of asking what their situation might be. She knows it's what he's waiting for, a question that will almost certainly cement her cooperation if she poses it, but he wants a favor from her beyond helping with the new machines and the Spire –

She can wait for him to be up front about it, even as the moment stretches between them, the hairs at the back of her neck rising and tension gathering in her hands.

Vanasha straightens her form, a smile pulling back the corners of her mouth as she meets Aloy's eyes. “Little huntress is showing us her teeth,” she says, and Marad finally moves back into her range of vision.

“Come,” he says, waving a hand to call her closer towards the desk. It feels like she's passed a test of sorts, even though she doesn't understand what it could mean, but Marad slides over a finely drafted sketch of a man's face across the wooden surface, keeping two fingers on the corner of the image as Aloy studies it. “Tell us what you see.”
“A man,” she huffs out. It becomes clear they're expecting more than that when they keep looking at her, and she places her hands on the edge of the desk, leaning in to take a better look at the drawing. Activating her Focus doesn't offer much insight beyond the materials used to create the image – charcoal and a sheet of bark paper.

Still, she knows how to read signs of a struggle in snapped twigs, the age of blood by color. This isn't much different. “Older than me, alive before the Derangement started. His eyes and nose... Carja, not Oseram.” There are lines on his face that indicate old, healed scars, one of them particularly striking as it leads from his temple inwards to the corner of his eye. “A fighter.”

“A defector,” Vanasha says in a tone one might easily mistake for cheerful. “A Shadow Carja right from the very start. Then, Eclipse. He was here during the battle for the Spire... He got away.” For once, Aloy can properly read the glint in Vanasha's eyes. If the man had crossed her path that day, he would've left the city to find a shallow grave.

It reminds her of what Vanasha told her at the gates, the I hate them that came from such a raw depth Aloy didn't have to wonder if she truly meant the words she spoke. Now, Aloy wonders if the man from the drawing is someone from Vanasha's past, fully aware she'll never learn the answer to that. It doesn't matter, either way.

“He's back,” she says instead.

“In a few hours, there will be a celebration in the Solarium,” Marad says. “The Sun-King has invited many nobles – to appease their puerile demands – and there is no doubt Keshad, the man you see before you, will make an appearance among them.”

Aloy leans back from the drawing. “So arrest him,” she says, even though she knows there must be a reason why that isn't their first course of action.

The eyebrows Vanasha raises at her suggestion speak for themselves even before the woman opens her mouth. “Arrest a man posing as a noble – disrupting the delicate balance of the onlookers – now there's a bold move. Why didn't we think of that before?”

“Alright.” Aloy turns her body away so they won't see her rolling her eyes. She rubs a knuckle along the lower part of her forehead, pushing it against the pressure building behind it. “Then what – you want me to go in there and do, what, exactly? I'm not a noble – nor a member of the Vanguard. I'm just a Nora Savage with a bow and a...”

She trails off, noticing how both Marad and Vanasha are studying her. Something she said must have... She quickly bounds back over her words, trying to find what it is she mentioned that made the spies' ears pique like that. Not a noble, Vanguard, Carja, but...

Memories of her speaking to Marad before the battle for the Spire surface. Don't be so humble. The final piece of the puzzle slots into place and Aloy's eyes widen even as she takes a step back. It's her. It's because of who she is. They want to use her as –

“Bait?” she hisses. Unbidden she remembers the way Sylens used her during the quest to defeat the Eclipse, the way he dismissed her after she pointed out his willingness to send her to the place where HADES resided without informing her.

The others seem unfazed by her reaction. “Yours is a familiar face, little huntress,” Vanasha says. “One that will throw Keshad off his path.”

“Fine,” Aloy says through clenched teeth. “Just show me what I need to do.”
Mingle with the nobles. Socialize.

With tight lips and half a mind to walk away from the next person who asks if they can touch her hair, Aloy grips the glass in her hand. It was given to her earlier, filled with a foul tasting alcoholic liquid that the nobles seem to enjoy.

Elisabet isn’t even there to physically distract her from the awed looks and hushed whispers that follow Aloy around as she participates in the feast. More like wanders from one spot to another, hoping no one will address her.

“Smile a little more,” Elisabet’s voice speaks into her ear, and Aloy masks the disgruntled sound that escapes her by pressing the rim of the glass to her lips without actual intent.

Going against Marad’s wish for secrecy, she briefly discussed the situation with Elisabet when they were alone – leaving out details, but she did mention having to blend in with socialites for an assignment – and they agreed to have Elisabet and GAIA be her second pair of ears and eyes. Not that Aloy couldn’t perform her appointed task without their support, because she could, without a doubt.

Of the two of them, Elisabet is clearly the one with more experience when it comes to actually speaking to people, able to set conversations to her hand in seconds. It’s a fact, one that the woman doesn’t bother hiding as she laughs softly on the other end of the Focus’ call. “Pick a target,” Elisabet says. “Pretend they’re me when you talk to them.”

But none of them are you.

Aloy tries to imagine Elisabet standing beside her nonetheless, and the pressure pushing down on her brow lifts a little.

“Better,” Elisabet's voice praises, and Aloy now uses the rim of the glass to hide the smile that tugs on the corners of her mouth. “Now in a moment, slowly look over to your left side–”

Before she's done speaking, Aloy's eyes snap to her left, finding their mark in the span of a second – a young Carja noblewoman who is looking her way. They meet eyes, and the noblewoman's eyebrows raise in surprise, her mouth opening slightly before she averts her gaze in haste. Aloy quickly does the same. That probably wasn't how the interaction was supposed to go.

“Slowly – I said slowly.”

“Sorry,” Aloy mumbles against the glass, forgetting what it is she's holding exactly as she takes a sip and swallows. She shudders.

Oh, vile.

“It's okay, we can salvage this,” Elisabet says. “She's still looking so, slowly and then smile.”

Following Elisabet's instructions, Aloy moves her head towards the noblewoman with more care, lowers the glass and... smiles.

Immediately Elisabet's voice is back, her words coming out faster and faster as she speaks. “The woman is me, Aloy, it's me looking at you and I just did a funny little shrug, ha ha, this party is so awkward don't-you-just-hate-it-too? Raise your glass to me – noblewoman me – if you think this is awkward, ha ha.”
The feeling of a laugh bubbles up underneath Aloy's chest and she smiles with ease, raising her glass as per instruction. The noblewoman seems stunned for a moment, but then the gesture is returned with a small nod and a bow.

Aloy doesn't miss the shuddered breath of relief in her ear. “Okay, good, Aloy. Now go up to her and say something about the feast.”

She does, carefully weaving between the nobles and servants until she reaches her target. *Pretend it's Elisabet*, she reminds herself. When she finally comes face to face with the noblewoman she feels something pull her back because the stranger is looking at her and –

*No, it's Elisabet.*

“So, hah,” Aloy says, shuffling on her feet a bit before she finds her center again. “Is it just me or does this drink taste of Salvebrush?”

There's a cautious hum on the other end of the Focus' call. “Umh... Aloy...”

The noblewoman's eyes go wide again and she gapes at her own glass. “Do you suppose someone poisoned the liquor in order to fell the Sun-King?” she says, staring towards Aloy in horror.

Oh no.

“Say it was a joke, Aloy,” Elisabet hisses in her ear. “Repeat, *that was a joke.*”

“N – no,” Aloy stammers, a smile twitching the corners of her mouth upward. *You're talking to Elisabet.* “It was just a joke, there's nothing actually wrong with it – I mean, I don't think so, it's not something I usually drink and so uh... Can't really tell if it's, you know. Poisoned or –”

“Laugh and drink from the cup.”

Aloy laughs while trying desperately to remember what an actual laugh sounds like, and moves the cup in another salute. She really doesn't want to –

“Take a sip, Aloy. Now.”

*Fine.*

She sets the rim of the glass against her lips and takes a big swig, swallowing before –

*Hurgh –*

Bad idea. The shiver is back, making her feel like the drink is trying to crawl into every crevice of her body. She blinks hard, shaking her head. “Nope, still don't like it,” she gags, no longer paying attention to the Carja.

It's when a soft laugh reaches her ears that Aloy looks up again, finding the noblewoman's eyes squinted in mirth, one hand covering her mouth. “I never imagined Meridian's Savior to be unused to the Sun-King's delights.”

“That's me,” Aloy says when her Focus stays silent. “Much better equipped with my bow in hand.”

The noblewoman seems assured though, and turns to one of her companions, nudging them to join the conversation. Aloy makes use of the moment to scan the room, trying to find anyone who fits Keshad's description.
“I am Nerandi and this is Raneva,” the noblewoman says, her companion bending her head to Aloy in greeting. “We were both surprised to see you here – having heard of your return, as the Sun rises, but everyone knows the Savior oft has more pressing matters to attend than... a celebration.”

Aloy's already forgotten their names as soon as the noblewoman stops speaking. “I'm Aloy,” she says. “No need for titles.” Still no sight of Keshad. GAIA had said that she'd make use of a face-recognizing program to scan for him through Aloy's Focus, but she has no idea how that would work if she isn't looking around, too.

She hasn't given much thought to how she'll lure Keshad away from the main party, either, but she knows she'll find a way when the time arises.

The nobles try to hold her attention with small talk, mentioning the decorations of the feast and the different foods the palace staff has prepared. How Avad is truly lifting the shadow of darker times...

...perhaps this does not interest the Savior– Aloy,” one of the noblewomen says, the use of her name drawing her back into the conversation. There's light worry on the nobles' faces and...

Crap.

“It interests me,” Aloy says, trying to remember even a part of the topic of discussion. “The ah, palace is very... I mean I've never – ”

She almost sighs with relief when Elisabet's voice is back. “Compliment her jewelry. Say, you've got – ”

“– a beautiful headdress,” Aloy finishes before even pausing to understand what she's saying. Just go with it. It isn't hard to figure which parts of machines were used to create it, as whoever made it was proud of their kill. Kills, even. “A Glinthawk can be a worthy adversary. I've never seen their beaks used like that.”

The noblewoman blushes at her words of praise, cheeks turning a bright red. “The father of my father was a member of the Hunter’s Lodge,” she says with pride.

Some quick counting brings Aloy to the conclusion that this must've been before the Derangement. She isn't sure what the exact rules on trophies were in those days, but the Glinthawks were either from one of the first successful hunts or considered impressive enough back then to immortalize like that.

“A member of the Lodge?” Aloy repeats. “Quite the achievement. Have you ever considered hunting yourself?”

The blush intensifies as the noblewoman answers that she'd love to but her family would not approve and –

“Aloy,” GAIA's voice interjects. “I have detected a match in profile to your right.”

“I see him as well,” Elisabet says. “Dressed like a servant and closing in on you, it seems.”

Right.

She can feel her heart-rate spike in anticipation, her fingers gripping the glass in her hand like she
would hold on to her spear. If Keshad is already moving towards her, he must know who she is, meaning all she has to do is lead him away from the party... but how?

The nobles are still speaking to her, with the one she's focused on most saying, “Sunhawk Talanah is allowing more Hawks into the Lodge, and you are a Hawk too, are you not?”

From the edges of her sight Aloy can see Keshad's form nearing, an idea sparking at the back of her mind. He's only a few paces away by the time the nobles expect her to answer, and she laughs, drawing more attention to herself. “I don't know how active of a member Talanah thought I'd be when she ranked me a Hawk, but yeah. Officially I am a Hawk of the Hunter’s Lodge. In fact – ” she takes a quick step backwards, putting herself straight into Keshad's path as she pretends to look around, and –

They collide, the glass in Aloy's hand trapped between them, spilling fluid everywhere. Gasps arise from the crowd surrounding them, and Aloy places a hand on Keshad's shoulder to steady herself, not looking at his face. Instead, she gapes at the liquid disaster on their clothes, on the terrace floor, and holds the near empty cup away from her body as if it has in some way personally offended her.

One of the noblewomen comes to her aid, taking the glass from her, all the while trying not to touch any of the liquid herself. In any other situation Aloy would have expressed the amusement she feels seeing the ridiculous amount of care the woman takes to remain untarnished, but now she gives words of gratitude as she steps back from the mess she's created.

“I should go... clean myself,” Aloy says, her attention strictly on the noblewomen as she excuses herself. The Carja clear a path for her as she calmly moves to the edge of the terrace, to where one of the stairs lead to a more private area down below. She even gives a polite smile to another noble as she declines their offered help.

“He's following you,” Elisabet says, but Aloy already knows. The hunt is in her blood, and while Keshad thinks he'll find her cornered, she knows that won't be the case.

The stairs are unguarded, almost suspiciously so, as are the lower areas. In fact, the balcony she's picked before the feast is a dead end. She slows her gait, giving Keshad time to catch up, and hopes he'll be upon her before she has to act out any 'surprise' at the location.

“Aloy,” Elisabet says, but the rest of the sentence never follows when footsteps proclaim Keshad's presence. The steps of a soldier – he doesn't even bother to hide them now that they're alone.

She turns around before he has closed in on her completely, not giving him the chance to grab her from behind. It is Keshad, no doubt about it. The scar next to his eye is covered by something that is supposed to mimic skin, a paste that is only a shade off the color of his complexion. It's been applied for a while, the disguise showing signs of disturbance.

“How do you mean 'Meridian’?” she asks, purposefully relaxing her upper body but keeping her legs in firm contact with the ground. “Because I feel you may be less welcomed here than I am, Keshad.”

A twitch in his demeanor. He's slowly advancing, looking for an opening. There's the balcony's edge three paces behind her and two to her left, a wall on her right. It'll be hard to find her body if he throws it over the railing. She can see the train of thought cross his mind as his eyes dart off to the side once, then twice.
“You thwarted the Buried Shadow at the Spire, but He will return,” Keshad growls, a warning before he lunges, and Aloy ducks, avoiding his grasping hands, feeling a knee make contact with her side. She deflects in time, rolling along with it and making a jab for Keshad's eyes.

A flurry of movement follows in a struggle to assert dominance, both trying to get their grip on the other. Keshad's hand shoots forward, closing around Aloy's throat and she leans into it, pressing her hand \textit{down} on top of his, twisting her shoulder inwards and kicking off with her back leg.

The top of her head makes contact with Keshad's jaw and he stumbles back. At the same time, Aloy digs her fingers into the meat of the hand at her neck, pulling the thumb away from her throat and twisting the hand quickly until a lock forms – then \textit{pushes down}.

Keshad, despite his substantial advantage in height, is thrown to the ground by his own weight as he struggles against the lock Aloy has on his wrist. She follows him in the motion, letting her knees fall against his body, preventing him from getting up immediately after.

A flash of orange from the doorway beside the stairs catches her eye, and Aloy pulls back quickly – her moment of distraction giving Keshad an opening he tries to use to reach for her throat again. She blocks with her lower arm, rolling the wrist along Keshad's trajectory to throw off his aim, and as he crawls back to his feet with fury in his eyes she sees Vanasha, a glint of steel catching the sun's light between her fingers.

Before he's back to his full height, Vanasha breaks Keshad's balance with a well-aimed kick to his knees, and then the woman's arm is wrapped around his neck, her other hand hidden behind his back. Keshad grimaces, leaning forward as far as he can in her grip, the rest of his body held stiff.

“Hello \textit{darling},” Vanasha purrs, biting her lower lip in a way that would be considered seductive in any other setting. Now it's fueled by a different kind of lust, and Aloy can see the moment Keshad realizes what happened when he releases a breath, sagging like a man who knows defeat.

For a second she wonders if it's a ruse, if he's trying to get Vanasha to release him by feigning compliance, but then she notices the crimson drops collecting on the sandstone floor between their bodies.

When Keshad speaks, his breath is labored. “Should have... \textit{known}... it's you.”

“You should have,” Vanasha says. Beneath the pleasant demeanor of her face is gritted teeth. “And \textit{yet}, here we are.”

Aloy shakes out the arm she used to block Keshad, rubs her other hand over her throat, covering the scar while trying to calm her heartbeat. “There,” she says to Vanasha, her voice more hoarse than she'd like. Keshad is watching her, his eyes showing satisfaction even as Vanasha forces him to submit. “Did what you wanted.”

Two Carja guards appear on the stairs, one of them moving to Vanasha's side while the other extends a hand to Aloy. “Please follow me,” the man says. After meeting Vanasha's eyes for a moment, Aloy does as the guard asks, ignoring the hand he offers her.

“Well done, little huntress,” Vanasha murmurs in passing, and Aloy huffs, shaking her head. She did what was expected of her.

Her Focus stays quiet as she follows the guard back down into the palace, towards the guestrooms. It isn't something her attention lingers on, with the traces of adrenaline still pumping through her veins and her body on alert.
At one point, Aloy presses the back of her hand to her lip and it comes away with a red stain. She runs her tongue along the area on the inside of her mouth, wincing when it presses into a cut on her lower lip. Keshad must've gotten her there at one point during the fight.

Other parts of her body are starting to ache, the sensation a familiar one, and she dismisses the guard when they reach the guestroom, going through the doors by herself. She doesn't need anyone to coddle over her. This is her reality.

She isn't sure what she'd expected upon arrival, but closing the door behind her Aloy finds Elisabet standing near one of the narrow windows, her back facing the entrance of the room.

There's a fresh set of clothing laid out on the bed, an outfit similar to the one Aloy's wearing. Tugging on the fastenings of the armored plates, Aloy sheds the gear, letting it drop to the floor without further care. With the adrenaline fading fast now, she feels exhaustion settle in her muscles.

After taking off her boots, Aloy finds Elisabet turned around. A moment of silence stretches between them, one wherein Elisabet's eyes shift minutely, taking all of her in. Wetting her lips, Aloy steps forward, using one hand to point at the woman, the gesture faint as her hand falls back down.

“Thanks,” she says, “for the help.”

She's hardly done speaking before Elisabet moves towards her, and then she finds herself in the arms of the woman. Aloy pushes back against Elisabet with a light touch because – this wasn't what she expected. There's no need for her to be held –

“Please,” she hears the woman whisper. “Just let me hold you. Please.”

Wishing you happy holidays and hope you all have a safe and happy New Year <3 See you the seventh of January!
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Happy new year everybody! :)

Much love to burbear for beta-reading. <3

Elisabet Sobeck is begging her to stay in her arms, to allow the woman this moment. Aloy complies, bringing her own hands up to rest on the woman's back, understanding that this isn't about her. That it has nothing to do with how she's feeling or how the fight affected her.

Elisabet's face is pressed against Aloy's braids, but she can still hear the woman as she quietly asks GAIA to perform a full body scan on her. “I'm okay,” Aloy says. Following through on a hunch she reaches and presses her fingers against Elisabet's chest, finding the upper part of her sternum, a spot that is only covered by a thin layer of Carja blue cotton. Beneath her fingertips pounds a mechanical heart, the beating much faster than she's used to.

“Mild lacerations,” GAIA says, calm as ever. “A few contusions. Scans indicate no life-threatening injuries.” Then GAIA adds something only Elisabet's Focus relays, her words a low hum of noise.

When Elisabet answers, it's in a voice Aloy can hardly recognize, soft and shaken. “He wanted her dead, GAIA,” the woman whispers. “He was trying to kill her.”

“I'm okay now.” Aloy pulls back from the embrace, taking hold of Elisabet's hands. “He didn't get me. I knew what I was doing, I could handle it...” Her words trail off as she looks Elisabet in the eye, forcing herself not to look away from the pain she sees there. It looks like she's crying, but there is no sign of tears on her face.

Elisabet's mouth opens and closes a few times. “I know,” the woman says, finally. “I saw everything through your Focus.”

She knows what it's like to watch someone else fight, struggle to survive, and not be able to do anything to help. “I'm... sorry,” Aloy says, but Elisabet shakes her head firmly.

“You were amazing,” she says, squeezing Aloy's hands in her own. “Amazing and – and so strong. I understand that this is what you do. I only wish you didn't have to.”

Aloy swallows around the lump forming high up in her throat, and she nods, carefully leading Elisabet to the cushions around the low table and helping her sit down. She then notices the bowl of water on top of the table, the bandages beside it.

“Udina brought these not long after you left for the party,” Elisabet says, clearing her throat once. “Gave me... a warning, of sorts. Something to prepare myself for, but...”

It hadn't been enough.

“I wasn't allowed to discuss it with anyone,” Aloy says, trying to explain it all – but Elisabet shakes her head.
“I understand. I do. Go –” the woman waves a hand towards the bed, “– change into clean clothes. We can talk after, if you want.”

The thought of having to discuss what happened any longer makes Aloy itch for an escape, but she hears the options Elisabet lays out for her. She doesn't want to talk about it, so they won't. Wetting a bandage in the bowl of water, Aloy dabs away crusted blood from small wounds. There's hardly any visible trauma left behind by Keshad's hands. Only some aches and the lingering sensation of a hand around her throat, but it'll pass. It always does.

Dressed once more, she returns to Elisabet, sinking down into the soft cushions. Elisabet waits with patience, waits for Aloy to make her decision clear, and Aloy reaches for her hand. It feels like she needs to touch her, to let her know she's still here, but perhaps Elisabet isn't the only one who wants to feel grounded for a second.

She considers telling her about Keshad and Vanasha. How he was there originally to attack the Sun-King. How she was asked to lure him out because of her status. Instead, she says, “I could show you around upstairs. The feast hasn't ended yet and... now that I've taken care of Keshad, we're both free to go wherever we want.”

The smile that appears on Elisabet's face is frail, a pale shadow compared to the one Aloy has seen her use on many occasions, but in a way it feels more honest, too. She rests her free hand atop Aloy's, pressing down briefly. “I'd like that.”

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By the time the sounds of the feast reach them, Elisabet's composure is back in place – like nothing ever happened to it. A hush falls over the crowd when they enter the terrace, heads turning to admire the latest arrival – the mother of the Savior. Aloy refuses another drink when it's offered to her, but Elisabet accepts a glass with a small but graceful bow.

Sticking close together, Aloy and Elisabet walk among the nobles as they all return to their previous conversations, the novelty of seeing Elisabet for the first time wearing off quickly.

“Aloy!” a voice calls out from the crowd, and people part ways to let through Talanah. The Sunhawk is wearing armor even more ornate than Aloy's and seems to have been enjoying the drinks of the feast, her glass almost empty. “I learned of your presence but couldn't find you earlier.”

Aloy grins as her former Hawk brushes a punch against her shoulder, and moves slightly out of the way, pretending to be struck by it. “Had some business to take care of,” she says, then reaches out to Elisabet, her hand hovering near the woman's side. “I'm sure you've heard already but... Talanah, this is my mother, Elisabet.”

Bending at the waist in a flourished bow, Talanah greets Elisabet. “Pardon my surprise,” she says when she rises, catching Aloy's eye before bringing her attention back to Elisabet. “You don't seem very Nora.”

Taking it in stride, Elisabet nods. “That would be correct,” she says. “I was never part of the Nora. Not truly.”

“Then you must be very proud of your daughter's accomplishments, her many hunts and victories,” Talanah says, and Aloy can feel her cheeks starting to burn. Why is everyone always so eager to bring that up? Even worse is Elisabet's expression, which only seems to confirm Talanah’s words.

“C'mon you two,” Aloy mutters before impulsively taking Elisabet's glass and drinking from it. She
grimaces while swallowing the liquid away, hoping it'll *dull the sensations* as people claim. All it does is make her shiver and cough to the side before handing the glass back, with both Talianah and Elisabet amused by her actions.

“Well,” Elisabet says, drawing the word out. “I, for one, am interested to hear how one defeats a Redmaw. That happened here, right?”

*The Redmaw,* Talianah corrects, and Aloy's blood runs cold because – she's fairly sure Elisabet never linked the imagery of the Apex Combat machine to the tale of Redmaw. Her suspicions are confirmed when Talianah says, “The most terrible of Thunderjaws. One swipe of its tail could down five hunters,” and Elisabet’s eyes snap to Aloy.

“I didn't do it alone,” Aloy says in a small voice, trying to placate the woman before Talianah ruins that too by *laughing*.

“No, we finished it together as Hawk and Thrush! Third year of the reign of Sun-King Avad, five years of bloodshed coming to an end as the beast was defeated. My family's legacy restored with Ahsis unseated.” Talianah's voice grows softer as her words become more sincere, a hand reaching out to hold Aloy's shoulder when she says, “I am forever grateful to you, Aloy.”

Well. That's –

“Glad I was able to help,” she says to Talianah. “And you did come to my aid when the Spire was attacked.”

Clapping Aloy's shoulder, Talianah finishes the last of her drink. “Another reason to celebrate! We should drink to that.” After a quick look around the terrace, Talianah ducks away towards a palace servant, telling Aloy to 'hold on to that thought'.

Left alone with Elisabet, Aloy dares a quick glance at the woman to determine her mood. The fire that sparked there earlier has fizzled down, and Aloy finds herself struggling to get a read on Elisabet.

“Seems you did a whole lot more than *just* defeating HADES when I wasn't around,” Elisabet murmurs as she steps in closer to Aloy. “It shouldn't surprise me, you've been showing me the signs pretty much clear as day but... *the* most dangerous Thunderjaw out there? Those are *massive* machines, Aloy.”

“Someone had to do it,” Aloy says. She looks away, staring at some of the Carja headdresses as she remembers the day she followed Talianah into the Jewel. “It was killing people and Talianah would've tried to defeat it alone, if I hadn't gone with her.”

“Could she have done it by herself?”

Unlikely. She shrugs and says, “Maybe.”

After being worn down by Ahsis' mercenaries, the chances of Talianah defeating Redmaw by herself would have been slim. Maybe she could've brought down the beast, only to succumb to her own injuries on the way back to Meridian. Maybe another swipe of its tail would have flung her into the other side of the rocks. Most scenarios Aloy imagines end in blood.

Blood on her hands.

She snaps out of her daze when Elisabet sighs and reaches for her, a hand holding on to her upper arm. Elisabet's thumb moves across the skin above her elbow and it's...
“You're a good kid, Aloy.” Elisabet says. The words and gesture combined send a spark of warmth up Aloy’s throat where a lump forms, the heat touching the corners of her eyes.

“I... I try,” she says, forcing herself to breathe around the lump, keeping her eyes fixed on a particularly colorful headdress. All of a sudden she finds herself missing Rost, truly missing him for the first time in ages. Even with Elisabet standing right next to her, she wishes she could see Rost one last time. Speak to him face to face, just once more.

She wets her lips, her mouth gone dry in the span of a few seconds. “Do you ever... miss people from... before?” she asks Elisabet without looking at her, then realizes that the question must seem strange, posed out of seemingly thin air. Stupid, she reprimands herself, to bring something like that up, but then Elisabet’s hand squeezes her arm.

“All the god-damn time,” Elisabet says, her voice low and... there's more there, a deeper pain, an anger – something Aloy doesn't think she should try to touch, not here at least.

Talanah returns, and Elisabet's mask is back in place while Aloy struggles to smile – but Talanah doesn't notice, handing her a full glass.

“To our victories,” Talanah says and drinks, Elisabet following her example. Aloy doesn't think about it too much as she sets the glass to her lips, a part of her glad to hydrate her throat –

A part that clearly forgot about the rotting taste of death the drink spreads.

Aloy shakes her head again, trying to rid herself of the awful sensation rippling through her body when the drink goes down. “I hate it.” she grumbles, giving the glass to Elisabet, and, without pondering her words, “I just want some fucking water.”

“Fucking water?” Talanah repeats, her expression puzzled. “I've never heard of that. Waters of the Dawn or from Forbidden Snow... Is it a – ”

“A very special Nora spring of water, yes,” Elisabet says quickly. “Only brought out by the – the Matriarchs once a year, but any water will do, really.”

“Well, let's get you some water then,” Talanah says with cheer, taking the glass from Elisabet and emptying it in one of the decorative plants nearby. “Stay right there,” she says before bounding off again.

With her former Hawk out of sight, Elisabet turns to Aloy and whispers, “Fucking water, Aloy?” For a moment Aloy imagines Elisabet might be angry over the slip-up, but the woman's face tells a different story, the wrinkles around her eyes deepened by amusement.

“I'm sorry, it just happened.”

“You're lucky these people have no idea what the fuck you're talking about,” Elisabet says with a raised eyebrow, and this time it's Aloy who can't hide her surprise.

She did not – !

Elisabet hushes her when she tries to reply, saying, “Talanah is on her way over,” and sure enough, the Sunhawk returns, giving Aloy a glass filled with a clear liquid. A quick sniff and sip confirm that it is, in fact, regular water, and Aloy thanks Talanah.
“Just in time, too,” the Sunhawk says, and before Aloy can ask what she means by that, the crowd falls silent, the band that’s been playing festive music stops. There’s only the wind, the songs of birds in the forest surrounding the palace, and the sense of utter stillness as no one dares speak.

All heads turn to the center of the terrace, the place where normally the king sits to discuss matters with his advisers... or have lunch with certain machine hunters. Now, the couches and table have been taken away, and instead the area is treated as a stage, complete with a temporary wooden podium.

Talanah nudges Aloy, gesturing for her and Elisabet to follow, deftly guiding them to a spot closer to the podium, their backs to one of the towers on the terrace. Members of the band clear the stage, and some of the nobles at the front even sit down on cushions laid out on the ground.

With fewer heads blocking the way, Aloy can finally see what’s happening on the podium without having to move around so much. Everyone seems to be waiting for something. Then there’s movement off to the side, the nobles making way for someone, and a woman takes to the stage.

She’s dressed in white finery embellished with gold, red, and orange, and while Aloy doesn’t understand much about Carja fashion, she can tell this woman outshines everyone else. There’s something about her, a quiet beauty accompanied by elegance. Her dark, curled hair gives her a better crown than the headdress she’s wearing. The bright blue Carja markings on her face only serve to highlight the warmth of her brown eyes – and everyone holds their breath as she finds her place on the podium, settling down on a low stool.

Even the way she folds her legs alongside her body seems graceful.

A servant hands the woman an instrument, a bow harp with many strings. Aloy hasn’t often considered music beyond whether it sounds good or bad when she’s listening to it, but in this moment she finds herself drawn to the woman on stage, to the way she bends her hands as her fingers rest on the strings – before even a single note has been played.

Another musician joins her on the podium with a flute, and the music begins. It’s a pleasant melody, reminiscent of different Carja songs Aloy has heard before and... she finds herself disappointed in some way. The flute and harp go well together, their individual songs completing each other, but somehow she’d expected more after the spectacle surrounding the woman.

“It's the Winter Solstice song,” Talanah murmurs next to her. “A few days late but... a good rendition.”

A noble in front of them turns their head slightly to shush them, and as soon as they've turned around again Talanah aims a glare at their back. Aloy bites the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing.

The song ends and the crowd cheers. Both musicians take a bow with their instrument when someone shouts, “Saranah, play us your song!”

A noble in front of them turns their head slightly to shush them, and as soon as they've turned around again Talanah aims a glare at their back. Aloy bites the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing.

The song ends and the crowd cheers. Both musicians take a bow with their instrument when someone shouts, “Saranah, play us your song!”

The woman in white looks up, her eyes searching the crowd for the person who called out, when another noble says, “Yes, please play for us, Saranah!”

More voices join in the call for music. Alone on stage by now, the woman smiles and shakes her head, but the crowd isn't deterred. There's something to her eyes, something hidden behind that smile. Aloy can feel its presence.

Next to her, Talanah sighs. “This always happens,” she says, leaning further back against the wall,
“and she always gives in.”

Sure enough, the woman sits down again all by herself and the crowd goes quiet. When her fingers touch the strings it is nothing like what she played before – a melody that starts off with harsh sounds before a pause, and then... notes like a soft voice, a bird's whisper along snowy mountain tops, but they’re... sad.

Haunted.

Aloy can feel something tugging in her chest much like the way the woman's fingers pluck at the strings. After staring at the stage for what feels like a small eternity, Aloy lets herself look around, checking the faces in the crowd and...

Some of the people are crying.

The song ends, and this time, no one dares to move or say anything. The woman isn't moving either, her instrument cradled in her hands, her gaze far off until there is a low murmur in the crowd at the other end of the stage. Only then does she look up to see Avad, wearing his ceremonial robes and crown, making his way onto the podium.

A servant comes quickly to relieve the woman of her instrument as the Sun-King approaches her. Avad extends a hand to her, and Aloy swears she can hear multiple gasps coming from the nobles when the woman accepts, and together they rise and walk to the edge of the podium, where Avad lifts their hands for everyone to see.

The crowd goes wild.

There's cheers, laughter, glasses being raised and other glasses being refilled – Aloy is fairly sure most people have stopped watching the podium at this point, but she sees the moment Avad lowers their hands, and there's a smile touching the corners of his lips when he holds the woman's hand with both of his before letting go.

They leave the stage together, the band quickly assembling again to start playing another festive song, but Aloy is still trying to track Avad and the woman through the crowd as they leave the terrace.

Who is she?

“Saranah Khane Sovaliy,” Talanah says, making Aloy realize she posed the question out loud. “Look at them, pretending this is all a surprise.”

The bitterness in Talanah's voice makes Aloy reconsider the events that just transpired. She's never seen anything like it, all of it seeming like just another strange Carja ritual. Was the music a part of it, or was that merely entertainment? She looks to Elisabet in the hopes she was able to make more sense of it.

“I think we witnessed a royal engagement,” the woman says, her eyes squinted in thought.

Aloy scoffs. “That wasn't a...” But she remembers Udina's gossip, her joy at the prospect of Avad marrying a Khane. Unsettled, Aloy turns her attention back to Talanah. “That was a Carja wedding?”

“Not a wedding,” Talanah says, downing whatever's left in her glass. She seems troubled, casting a glance in the direction Avad and Saranah went. “This was the private announcement of the engagement. Then there's the public feast, and later the actual wedding. Carja like their rituals,
especially the nobles.”

It doesn’t make sense. The woman on stage was the opposite of what Aloy had imagined Avad's future queen to be, her quiet and meek appearance a stark contrast to Ersa's fire.

“Let’s get out of here,” Talanah says, pushing off the wall. “There are some places inside the palace you should see.”

Just as Aloy looks over to the spot where Elisabet was, her Focus notifies her of a new message, and she opens it.

FROM: Elisabet Sobeck  
TO: Aloy  
SUBJECT: (no subject)

You go catch up with your friend. I'll be at the party a little longer. Find you later.

Quickly scanning the room, she finds Elisabet's signature further down among the nobles, and the woman waves at her before turning back around to the person she's talking to. The idea of leaving Elisabet by herself is not a comforting one, but... she seems okay, and Talanah is already going ahead, moving to the outer rim of the terrace.

Aloy makes her decision, catching up with Talanah by lightly jogging the few paces she got on her. “Do you envy her? Saranah?” Aloy asks as they walk past the guards near the stairs, thinking back to the first image that appeared in her mind when she heard of the royal wedding – a Sunhawk standing next to a Sun-King.

A dismissive shake of her head dispels her theory. “She's my cousin,” Talanah says. “I only hope that Avad can make her happy in this charade to appease the elite.”

It feels like Talanah is more willing to speak openly without as many ears surrounding them, which might be the real reason she asked Aloy to come with her in the first place. “Doesn't sound like you share their views,” Aloy says, sneaking into a servants' entrance after Talanah.

“They're Glinthawks, Aloy,” she says. “I don't know our Sun-King very well, but his actions have been just so far. Righteous. I also know that if he married a Khane Pir, the Oseram trade routes would gain protection. Khane Morza has shown willingness to the Utaru, to... repair the damages done by Jiran.”

Their journey through the halls of the palace leads them deeper and deeper into the heart of the Palace of the Sun, past rooms where fires are being fed to heat the baths, Talanah explains. They head down even further.

“What of Khane Padish?” Aloy asks, and Talanah laughs.

“That would be me. I'm the only one unmarried,” the Sunhawk says. “It's been discussed. I could offer him a unity of the Lodge and the Palace. First in Carja history, two rulers sat upon a golden throne – but the other houses don't want me. I'm – ” she turns to face Aloy for a second, rolling her eyes as she drawls, “ – too controversial.”

Picking a lit torch from a sconce on the wall, Talanah continues. “The houses are spread thin. Morza had a good candidate, but she was... injured, during the liberation. Lost a finger.”

Aloy scowls. “And that means she can't marry the Sun-King?”
“They're a spiteful bunch. Like I said, Glinthawks. The only candidate everyone could agree on was Saranah.”

Arriving in a dark corridor, they stop in front of a wooden door, smaller than even the servants' entrances. It's almost hidden away in the thick stone wall. Talanah hands Aloy the torch and instructs her to keep the light on the lock as she takes two small iron tools from one of the folds in her attire.

“So...” Aloy pauses. The information she's been given in the past few minutes is a lot to take in, especially since she's never considered marriage before. Of course Rost told her about the Nora's ways, how they take a mate at some point in their lives, someone to share everything with and join as a family – but this almost sounds like a merchant's haggle. “I take it Avad isn't marrying your cousin because he … loves her.”

Still turning the lock picks slowly inside the door, Talanah says, “It's expected of him, to honor and cherish her, but no. Love has no place in a political marriage. Not here.” There's a resounding click from the metal. “He marries Saranah because her family is a traditional one, and she's undoubtedly the most beautiful woman in all of Meridian. Unassuming, restrained. Everything the Carja nobles adore. The Sovaliy can only offer more theater and music, but the houses don't care. All they see is a beautiful queen who won't kick up any more dust than Avad already has. A way to keep him in line.”

The door opens.

Talanah enters before her, setting light to the torches inside next to the door, then igniting the kindling in the raised bowl in the middle of the room. As flames rise Aloy blinks, adjusting her eyes to the dimly lit room. It is fairly large, about the size of the large chamber she bathed in earlier. There's a single table and chair, and wooden constellations set along the edge of the room, all filled with scrolls.

“What is this place?” Aloy asks, her Focus picking up names written on the edges of the scrolls. Carja, Oseram, Utaru, Banuk, Nora... names of all tribes, male and female. “Why did you bring me here, Talanah?”

“Just look,” the woman says. “I thought you should see for yourself.”

As her eyes become used to the light, small figures appear on the walls, a dark pigment used to paint their shapes. Aloy moves closer to the wall trying to make sense of the mural that stretches on and on. There's a small figure that catches her eye – a Brave standing on top of a mountain, facing a Kestrel – and her heart skips a beat.

It's her.

And it's Helis.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

I am so excited to share something with you all before the chapter begins. robinkitkat drew some amazing art to go with chapter 32, so please check it out! Her lines are wonderfully expressive and she manages to capture the characters so well! Thank you so much, robin! <3

I'm also amazed and humbled by the fact that this fic has almost 1,000 comments, over 500 kudos, and nearly 10,000 page views. Thank you all so much for sticking around! <3

As always, much love to the person who gets to deal with me at 3 AM (my time) and helps remove excessive 'that's and commas, burbear. Thank you for still helping me, bro!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The painted figures – they all depict moments of history. Dark moments.


HADES.

Her fingertips press against the pigmented sphere at the bottom of the painted Spire. All these... terrible, terrible things, and no sign of the victories. It's like looking at an even darker version of the world, one without light.

“What is this?” Aloy asks again, her voice shaking.

Talanah comes up to her, a somber expression on her face. “It's a promise,” she says. “A reminder.”

A memorial.

Taking one of the scrolls, Aloy only unrolls a small piece of it, enough to read a few lines of handwritten text. Name after name, the families and tribes they belonged to, and for each of them an end. Sacrificed in the Sun-Ring at High Noon. Beaten to death for disobedience. Left out for the Sun's Judgment after speaking heresy.

The weight of the air inside the room presses down against Aloy's shoulders.

“Avad showed it to me after the battle for the Spire,” Talanah says. “He said we should never forget what was done in the name of the Sun.”

She keeps reading the content of the scroll, and with each name the weight grows. There are hundreds of scrolls down here, and she imagines all of them filled with the same careful handwriting.
“I know Avad has asked that you help Meridian once more, and I know he trusts your counsel,” Talanah continues. “I also know there is still tension between tribes over what happened, wounds that may turn into scars over time.”

“The ice remembers,” Aloy says, her mind going back to moments in Banuk territory. “The Nora do, too.”

Talanah nods slowly. “A Sun-King's inner thoughts are not meant to be shared with anyone but the Sun,” she says, the words carrying a tone like scripture. “But we can still guess what a Sun-King's heart is filled with. If it's greed or lust... or power...”

Realizing what the room truly is, Aloy carefully rolls the scroll back up and places it back with its brethren. Avad's heart, filled with the crimes of his father and the dead that followed. She had always believed his admissions of guilt over the events, his attempts at reparations to be of honest and good intent, but coming face to face with everything inside this room brings about a feeling that cannot be explained.

An emptiness, an ache. Restless spirits breathing down her neck.

The feeling persists long after they exit the room and make their way to the upper levels of the palace.

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The nobles leave in the early evening, all traces of the feast quickly removed from the Solarium as the palace returns to normalcy. Talanah has left, as has Saranah, surrounded by a flock of family members and handmaidens.

As the sun leaves another day behind and all the lamps are lit inside the palace and the city, Aloy finds herself standing on the same balcony where she once found Erend after defeating Dervahl. She hasn't seen the Captain so far, not at the bridge nor at the feast. Somewhere in the distance, coming from the direction of the Spire, she can hear sounds of a fight. A single machine's cannon firing, a far-off battle cry...

Her hands are gripping the railing before she becomes aware of doing so. She knows GAIA would warn them of any immediate danger near the Spire but... still. She'd much rather leave the palace and see the situation for herself.

“Elisabet approaches,” GAIA says before Aloy hears the soft footsteps behind her.

She nods, keeping her eyes fixed on the jungle below.

“There you are,” Elisabet says, joining her at the railing. The woman leans forward, resting her elbows on stone, her hands entangled loosely. With the nighttime air lowering temperatures considerably, Aloy sees that Elisabet's been given a deep-blue cloak to go with her attire. “Thought you'd run off with your friend.”

Aloy purses her lips, shaking her head. “Needed some space,” she says instead, which is the truth. It's been a long day since they arrived in Meridian, and a lot has happened. She wouldn't mind going to bed soon, but they still have an audience with the king to look forward to. “Was the rest of the feast... enjoyable?”

“It was useful.” Elisabet smiles and before Aloy can ask what the cause of amusement is, the woman
adds, “some might even say... fruitful,” reaching into one of the cloak's sleeves and pulling out a handful of berries. She urges Aloy to take them and she does, although with slight reluctance.

“Where did you find these?”

“Palace kitchen,” Elisabet answers. “You can eat them, they're sweet. Not like that... Salvebrush earwax-y bullshit.”

Sticking one in her mouth and carefully running her teeth along the thin skin of the berry, Aloy waits for the fruit to burst under pressure. Sure enough it does, soft flesh and sweetness popping against her tongue. As the flavor hits, she notices how hungry she is, not having eaten much before the feast, and nothing after.

“Thanks,” she says halfway through stuffing her cheek with them.

Elisabet turns around, leaning her back against the balustrade instead, tilting her head to the side as she watches Aloy. “You can have more of them at dinner,” she says. “With the king. We've been invited and I think it'll start in... oh... a few minutes?”

Sharing a meal with Avad – how did Elisabet manage that? Did she talk to Marad?

Aloy can only ask how before Elisabet hums, pushing herself off from the railing and moving up the stairs to the Solarium. “Come along, little duck,” she calls over her shoulder, and Aloy turns to follow her.

Just as they're about to enter through the gates, Elisabet's words hit her.

“Wait, what's a duck?”

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Instead of the usual table and couches or the podium from earlier on in the day, there's a long low table with cushions around it in the middle of the royal terrace. Marad is waiting for them, ready to point Elisabet and Aloy to their places at the table.

It seems they're a bit early, and Aloy takes her time looking at different dishes already put on display. There are more blueberries, like Elisabet said. Aloy considers taking one (just the one) and eating it while they wait, but Elisabet catches her in the act and a single stern look makes her drop the berry back in place.

“The guards aren't even looking,” she whispers in her defense, and Elisabet chuckles, shaking her head.

Nasadi and Itamen arrive, taking their seats on the other side of the table. While technically Itamen's plate has been put opposite Aloy, in reality the prince leans heavily against his mother, leaving enough space at his spot for another guest.

There's only one plate unaccounted for at the head of the table, between Elisabet and Nasadi. For some reason, Aloy had imagined an evening meal with the king to be a more formal setting, perhaps even with some of the nobles present, but that does not seem to be the case.

Elisabet and Nasadi softly exchange greetings, giving the impression that they've spoken before. Maybe that's what Elisabet was up to during the feast. Aloy tries to make eye contact with Itamen, but the prince only presses further into the folds of his mother's clothing. So much for that, then.
“I apologize for my lateness,” Avad says when he finally arrives, no longer wearing the ceremonial robes. Despite his words the pace he keeps is a measured one, showing no signs of haste while he makes his way over to the head of the table and sits down.

“Please, speak freely,” Avad says, and Nasadi leans toward him, one hand reaching for the side of his head. The king turns into her touch, and with a tenderness that emphasizes the private moment they are allowed to witness he lowers his head. Nasadi’s lips brush Avad’s forehead. Avad’s eyes are closed, a smile – one of true happiness – on his face.

Aloy knows the woman isn't the king’s mother, but the familial act – she knows what that feels like.

“I hear congratulations are in order,” Elisabet says when Avad and Nasadi have returned to their proper places. Both king and dowager queen have started serving food onto their plates, a servant pouring out drinks, and Aloy takes it as a cue to do the same. A paste of beans and other... things... looks appetizing enough to try, and she takes a piece of bread to go with it. The bread’s still warm.

“Thank you. Today has been a step forward into the light, for all of us,” Avad says. The way the words come out his mouth makes Aloy wonder if he’s had to say them to people all day long. She remembers what Talanah said about it being the king’s duty to love his future wife but... he seems genuinely happy.

It takes a soft poke from Elisabet and GAIA repeating Avad’s question of I do hope you have been well taken care of, today for Aloy to look up and realize she’s being spoken to. “The baths were very – nice,” she stammers, trying to save her composure. “And your uh... Saranah’s music was good, too.”

“Betrothed,” Elisabet says.

“What?”

“His bride-to-be,” Elisabet says, repeating the word from before. Then she turns to the king. “At least, that's what my people call it.”

Avad nods, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “As do we,” he says. “Thank you, Aloy. She is an exceptional woman. And, thank you for accepting this invitation. I believe I may speak for the three of us when I say we are glad to have you join us.”

“We were unsure if you would be willing to do so after such a long day,” Nasadi says, and it's the first time Aloy has heard the dowager queen speak.

“Especially not with our... unconventional ways of serving,” Avad laughs. “Many nobles prefer a grand feast over what we have here.”

“I thought this was a feast,” Aloy lets spill from her tongue without thinking.

“Of course,” Avad says, his tone sobering. “Despite the lack of high chairs and overt embellishments, we are still blessed. Forgive my assumption – to us, this is a modest setting for a meal.”

“Perhaps you should step outside the palace and strike down a boar if you were going for modest,” Aloy quips, catching the raised eyebrows from Elisabet to her side, but Avad understands.

“Perhaps with a certain machine huntress,” he says with a wink.

So he does remember – their hunt together, hands soaked in blood.
Across from her, Itamen huddles closer to Nasadi and whispers something in his mother's ear, to which the dowager queen says, “Go on, you can ask her yourself.”

With a little prodding the prince sits upright and folds his hands over each other, resting them on the table like a small diplomat. “Did you bring down Redmaw, the great Thunderjaw?” he asks with a solemnness unbefitting of a normal child.

“Yes, I did,” Aloy says carefully, looking to Avad and Nasadi to find approval from both in the shape of slight nods. The last thing she'd want is for a prince to get nightmares because of her tales. “Together with Talanah.”

“Talanah Khane Padish, Sunhawk of the Lodge, daughter of Talavad Khane Padish,” Itamen says, reciting the names with excellent pronunciation. “How did you become a Hawk? In previous years, only seven were allowed to become Hawks.”

It's not a question Aloy expected to be asked by a child, but maybe she should have. “As Sunhawk, Talanah wants to change things in the lodge – for the better. She felt like too many good hunters had been excluded from the lodge before, so she made it possible for there to be nine Hawks instead of just seven.”

Talanah had explained it at the time, even said she wanted the lodge to be open for even more hunters – to give every tribe that wanted to participate a fair chance of entering, to allow for some fresh blood to flow through the lodge's veins. But she couldn't change everything at once, not with the push-back from the noble houses, who already thought two new seats were two too many.

“Are you a good hunter?” Itamen asks.

“Yes.” Because she is, has been for a long time since Rost's training. She worked hard to get where she is and is not afraid to admit it.

“I thought as much.” Itamen says with a nod that both ages and makes the boy seem so, so young. “Otherwise you would not have defeated Redmaw.”

“Ask her about the trials,” Avad says, gently guiding the conversation. “A hunter must face many challenges before gaining entrance to the lodge.”

Itamen's eyes light up and he clasps his hands together in excitement, and Aloy already knows she won't get much time to finish her own meal when questions start pouring out of the prince.

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In the end, after Itamen has cleared his own plate with reluctance, Nasadi and the prince leave and Aloy quickly loads her plate with food and a handful of blueberries before the servants come to clean everything up.

“You may take your time,” Avad says. “I apologize for directing him toward you but... it's been hard for my brother to open up, especially with strangers.”

“I noticed,” Aloy says, speaking around a piece of bread. For a second she catches the amused look Elisabet sends her way and she frowns, tilting her head in lieu of asking a question.

“Nothing.” Elisabet leans an elbow on the table, resting her chin in her hand. “Just amazed you can still get words out with so much food in there.”

Rolling her eyes, Aloy proceeds to take another bite of the bread.
Avad doesn't seem to care about her eating either way as he quietly converses with a servant. “Can I offer you anything to drink?” he asks them. “Shay or perhaps kahwa?”

Elisabet is quick to answer for them both while Aloy was still trying to figure out what Avad meant. “Shay for her and kahwa for me, please. Just trust me on this,” she says when Aloy looks at her.

Their drinks are brought out and while Aloy's looks a lot like normal tea, what is being served to Avad and Elisabet is almost pitch-black in color and has a very strong smell. It is offered to them in very small glasses, too, the contents of which do not seem more than a single swallow.

Avad downs his drink all at once, but Elisabet holds on to hers, raising it close to her face without actually touching the glass with her lips. “Let me... savor this,” she says with a laugh when the king appears to be studying her. “It's been a long time.”

“You've been to our lands before, then?” he asks, and Elisabet laughs again, shaking her head.


It's so close to the truth Aloy finds herself nervously twisting the hot glass of tea in front of her. “You wanted to speak to us,” she says, trying to steer the topic away from Elisabet's history, reminding the king of their original purpose for visiting.

“Yes,” Avad says, sitting up a little straighter. “We might as well discuss the matters at hand here, while we are all comfortably seated.”

Marad arrives quietly, bringing with him a few scrolls of paper to the table. He puts them down, unrolling one that reveals a lay of the land surrounding the Spire and Meridian.

“The Spire,” Avad begins, pointing it out on the map for Elisabet, then looking at Aloy to confirm that she understands as well, “has been subject to frequent but low scale attacks for a few moons now. The attackers appear to be machines only, but they are somehow... different.”

“Different how?” Aloy asks.

It is Marad who answers. “They seem to be producing an abundance of the material you may know as metalburn,” he says. “Their appearance differs from other machines in a way similar to ones that attacked Meridian with the Eclipse.”

Could they be dealing with the same machines that attacked them in Free Heap?

“Pardon my interruption,” Elisabet says, turning to Avad, “but I believe you have one of these devices as well, correct?” She tucks a lock of hair to the side, revealing her Focus to the king. Avad nods, and she continues by saying, “If you retrieve it, I think I can show you something that might be of importance.”

As a servant does just that, the king and adviser momentarily distracted, Aloy touches Elisabet's arm and leans in. “What are you going to show him?”

“You'll see,” Elisabet says, and she's right. Not much later the four of them are viewing a holo-vid of a vicious attack at night, several red-glowing machines fighting other machines and humans. Free Heap, the sound of Petra's cannon singing just outside of the view the holo-vid gives them.

A Sawtooth enters the frame, eyes red and ablaze with anger and corruption. For a second, Aloy can see herself behind the machine before it pounces and the view is abruptly distorted. The holo-vid ends.
As strange as it is to see herself in the midst of battle, the feeling that comes over her when she realizes the video isn't a Focus recording is even more unsettling. It's showing them what Elisabet saw that night, through the woman's eyes.

Aloy sips her tea slowly to busy herself in the quiet the holo-vid leaves behind.

Avad clears his throat, removing the Focus device from his temple. “Those... those machines are indeed the same ones. They attacked Free Heap?”

“Yes. It was a coordinated attack. They underestimated Free Heap's defenses but they had...” Elisabet turns to Aloy, wordlessly asking her for help.

“Sawtooths, Chargers, and a Ravager,” Aloy says, remembering the fallen machines of that night. “Two pairs of Sawtooths,” she adds because of the rare occasion. Machines that could easily overwhelm an opposing force. The outcome may have been very different if they had attacked Nora lands, facing wooden structures instead of stone walls.

“The Sun has spared us such violence thus far,” Avad says, his brows furrowed. “The Vanguard posted at the Spire have only encountered lone Sawtooths and scavengers. Glinthawks, Scrappers...”

“That only means whoever is behind these attacks is focusing their forces on other targets.” The way Elisabet speaks takes Aloy back to one of the first times she saw the woman in a hologram, standing across General Herres. That same steady urgency behind her words.

“Or,” Marad interjects, opposing her, “they are spread thin. An army on the rise.”

Scoffing, Elisabet tilts her head slightly, eyes tracking areas on the map laid out in front of them. Then she looks back at Marad. “Unlikely,” she says. “They could afford their losses at Free Heap, or else they would have sent in more machines, even men. Overconfidence on their part, perhaps.”

“You believe we are faced with a human enemy?” Avad asks. Aloy can tell he's listening with intent, not taking Elisabet's words lightly. “What of the Demon? How can you be certain it hasn't returned?”

“I'm not,” Elisabet says immediately. “However a machine like HADES – it was a machine, not a demon – cannot act all of this out by itself. HADES had servants, human servants, the ahh...”

The woman snaps her fingers a few times, seems to struggle to remember, and Aloy says, “The Eclipse.”

“Right, them. It wasn't working alone back then and whoever is behind these attacks isn't either. What's the reasoning behind a machine for trying to take out a Focus network when it could attempt an override instead.”

“HADES would have gone for an override,” Aloy says, realizing what Elisabet is trying to explain. “It understood the significance of the Spire, would have – ”

“– redirected forces there, found a way to overrun the Vanguard – ”

“– not Free Heap first, waste of time – ”

“– would have gone to Meridian immediately – ”

“– but who are we facing then?” Aloy asks. “How do you know it's humans and not a different machine?”
For a moment, it's just the two of them, and Elisabet's eyes turn soft and so, so sad. “Of course it's men, Aloy,” she whispers. “Behind the greatest tragedies in the history of mankind, it's always humans who deal the worst blows to each other, men who believe they know best at the cost of everything.”

A shiver runs down her spine, not just from the colder nighttime temperatures. She feels the urge to apologize but – for what? For all humans? For not having changed into a different kind of people, for not having been able to learn from the Old Ones' mistakes?

Elisabet must see something on her face because the woman reaches out to hold her hand under the table, shaking her head slowly. Then the moment is gone, leaving behind the uncomfortable knowledge that Marad and Avad haven't vanished into thin air but are still with them, actively following the conversation.

“It would seem... that you know more of these machines, the ones that are like... HADES,” Marad says. “Am I right to assume there are more of them?”

Elisabet's eyes snap up to meet the man, her mouth slightly opened before she says, with the smallest of inclines dipping her chin lower, “Yes. There are.”

“And one may assume... you possess the knowledge to find these machines.”

Technically they both do, with GAIA's help. Elisabet said they could use the Spire to manually track down signals, and GAIA has been analyzing anything the Spire has received on its end of the connection, breaking everything down into probabilities.

Aloy is about to agree with Marad's statement when Elisabet's fingers pinch the skin of her forearm, the woman's gaze steady on the adviser.

Elisabet's jaw is tight, her body still like stone. “That is information I will not share with you.”

With a faint smile that is straining against its edges, Marad says, “Perhaps Aloy would be willing to tell us instead – ”

“She won't,” Elisabet hisses, and the pinching is starting to hurt. “That sort of information holds all life on earth in the balance. We can work together on this problem but without full disclosure.”

“Elisabet – ” Aloy says, trying to gain the woman's attention, but Marad interrupts her.

“You understand that you come before us as allies, with knowledge that would benefit the Sundom's defenses, and yet refuse to share details that might influence the outcome of the very next attack we face.” There's something grim underneath it all, something that reminds Aloy of the whispers surrounding the man. Blameless Marad.

“You seem like a wise man, surely you understand the importance of secrets,” Elisabet counters.

“Yes,” Marad says. “Although I prefer knowing ones that might otherwise be paid for with the blood of the Sundom's citizens.”

“And I understand the position that puts you in, however – ”

The pain is getting to a point where the urge to pull her arm away is only getting stronger and stronger, but Aloy doesn't want to draw any more attention to it than she has to. “Elisabet,” she says again, then places her other hand on top of Elisabet's, trying to break the woman's grip on her skin. “Elisabet.”
Her combined actions manage to draw the woman away from the argument. “What...” The moment she sees what she's doing, Elisabet lets go of her arm as though it's a lump of burning coal. There's a spike of fear in her eyes before Elisabet actively puts her mask back in place. She rises from the table, excusing herself. “I'll be back shortly.”

Worrying her lower lip with her teeth, Aloy sucks in a sharp breath and realizes to her mortification that tears have formed at the edges of her eyes. She blinks hard trying to dispel them, and returns to sipping her tea and not looking at either man at the table.

She feels unsteady, like she's about to lose her footing at the edge of a cliff, but it's hard to put into words why. It isn't because of the discussion, and the pain – it didn't really hurt that much, it just... surprised her.

Rubbing over the pinched skin under the table helps remove the phantom fingers still there. Elisabet didn't mean to hurt her.

“Aloy,” Avad addresses her, and she fears he may ask how she's feeling based on his careful tone, but instead the question he poses is, “what are your thoughts on the matter?”

She isn't sure. In truth, the conversation took a much faster approach to discussing the sub-functions than she had imagined, and while she wishes to share information with Avad and his adviser she doesn't know how much is wise. Elisabet's reaction... her hesitance over revealing how one might find even one of them...

“Elisabet– my mother knows these machines better than anyone,” she ends up saying. “Better than I do. I've fought another one of them called HEPHAESTUS and it... didn't want to kill all humans, not like HADES. Only those it deemed a threat.”

“However, there are more of them,” Marad says, “and they have the means to attack us. Surely you understand the urgency of our request. Meridian's armies are still struggling from the last battle – we need to know how and when to act.”

“I – I don't think I should say anything without my mother present,” Aloy stammers.

If he disagrees with her he doesn't say so, and neither does Avad. There's a tense kind of silence as they wait for Elisabet to return, and Aloy continues to drink her tea slowly. Her Focus notifies her of a new message.

FROM: Elisabet Sobeck  
TO: Aloy  
SUBJECT: (no subject)

I'm so sorry I hurt you. I lost control and it shouldn't have happened.

The lump in her throat is back and she uses what's left of her tea to swallow it away. See, her mind tells her, she didn't mean to do it. It feels strange that those words mean so much to her because there's so much more at stake.

Elisabet returns to the table. They don't make eye contact, and Elisabet apologizes for her quick exit before diving headfirst into the debate again. It takes a while before Aloy is actively listening in on the debate instead of staring off into space.

“These machines are volatile,” Elisabet is saying. “They are not mean-spirited but they are unpredictable, and I'm afraid if someone... anyone... approaches them without caution, they might retaliate out of fear.”
Marad seems placated, as though Elisabet's confessed unease calms him somehow. “We would... treat this information with the utmost care,” he says.

Elisabet hesitates, then shakes her head slowly. “One well-meaning soldier. One general who believes they know better than their leaders.”

Her words stay in the air between the four of them, and Aloy can see how they affect everyone. The silent contemplation written on each of their faces. She finds her own mind drifting back to GAIA Prime, and the revelation of Ted Faro's actions there – how he destroyed immeasurable knowledge and lives by pressing a button...

Taking in a deep breath, Elisabet leans back from the table, her hands laid flat on its edge, fingers spread out towards Marad's charts. “We have a request of our own to make,” she says, eyes searching for both Avad and Marad's attention. “Access to the Spire. I cannot tell you more except that our goals are united. We both wish to stop these attacks, and we need the Spire to do so.”

“You speak from experience,” Avad says, addressing Elisabet. “I do.”

“You still wish to aid us, albeit without sharing this particular knowledge,” he then adds, and Elisabet nods her support to his statement. “Then by the Sun, let our causes be allied with no further quarrel.”

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Apparently being in agreement doesn't automatically mean an end to the discussion. Aloy picks away at her blueberries while listening to the strategies proposed by Marad and Elisabet discussing Meridian's army and baseline defenses. After everything the day has brought, Aloy doesn't feel the need to add her own voice here.

Besides, most of the things she's thinking are already being mentioned by either one of them.

Avad has more drinks brought in and encourages everyone to take a step back from the table. A physical step. While Elisabet and Marad seem to gravitate towards each other and continue speaking in hushed voices, Aloy takes her tea with her to the edge of the terrace.

This side of the palace doesn't offer a view of the Spire at all. Instead, as she rests her lower arms on the balustrade, having placed the cup of shay next to her, Aloy sees the endless trees and ridges of canyons. The shapes are mostly shadows out there, their crowns illuminated by the moonlight, but she knows them well. The wind in their leaves calls to her.

“Aloy.”

Avad's voice next to her almost results in her elbow throwing the shay over the railing as she startles and turns. It's only the king's quick reflexes that save the glass and its contents. They both let out a breath of relief, seeing the cup held in Avad's hands – not a drop spilt.

There's a moment where Aloy can see an apology on the man's face but she dismisses it by shaking her head and taking the cup from him. “Thank you,” she says.

Avad studies her, leaning his side against the balustrade, his hands touching each other by the tips of his fingers. “There are things I wish to discuss with you.”
It's been a long day. All she wants is to retreat to their assigned room and sleep, but the Sun-King's time is a precious commodity. “What about?” she asks.

“Elisabet Sobeck,” he says, and it only begins to dawn on her what he means exactly when he adds, with the slightest hesitation in his voice, “Alpha... Prime?”

She tries not to react to it, keeping her face as impassive as possible, but her grip on the glass tightens. “Where did you hear that?”

It's only through her continued efforts that her shoulders don't sag as tension seeps away when Avad says, “They were your words in the metal ruin of the Old Ones.”

Of course. She'd forgotten about it, the details of how she opened the ruin they visited so many moons ago already faded in her memory. She's surprised the king remembers, but maybe she shouldn't be.

“Who is she really, Aloy?”

For a moment, mere seconds ago, she'd been afraid of someone, something, having figured out Elisabet's origin. The woman's place in history. A fear fueled by whoever is sending those machines, a fear that whispered if someone else had told Avad, then more people knew about it.

Now... she finds herself considering Avad's question. The only ones in this world who know about Elisabet are they themselves, GAIA, and Sylens, but the king’s curiosity opens up possibilities, and...

She trusts him.

He may accept it if she refuses to answer him, but she knows he won't stop digging. After all, he has clearly been studying his own Focus device enough to get it to work and contact them in the first place. Who knows how far he'll be able to come in his research before he reaches a door that asks for his identiscan, and what sort of conclusions he'll draw at that point.

“She isn't my mother,” Aloy says, her mind made up.

Avad nods and, to his credit, only the slight widening of his eyes convey the wonder he must feel. His eyes flit to a spot over Aloy’s shoulder, and when Aloy follows his gaze she meets Elisabet's eyes, the length of the terrace between them.

The woman is still standing next to Marad as the adviser speaks, but her attention seems to lie solely on Aloy... then she turns back to Marad and responds, the distance making it impossible to overhear what's being said.

Strange.

“Perhaps we should discuss this in private,” Avad says. “If you go to my study, I will meet you there in a moment.”

Her mind lingering on what just transpired between her and Elisabet, Aloy shakes her head. “Right. See you there,” she says, answering in a way that feels automatic, and the king leaves her side.

*She couldn't have heard their conversation, could she?*

The idea that she should discuss this with Elisabet, work out what to tell the king together, crosses
her mind and drifts away just as quickly. This is between her and Avad, and she'll tell Elisabet about it later, she decides.

Opening her Focus, Aloy composes a message to Elisabet, telling her there's a private matter Avad wants to talk about and that she'll meet her back in their room. She ponders her words before sending them, and makes her way to the king's study.

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Located in one of the towers next to the terrace, Aloy is allowed inside by one of the Carja Guards. Following the round stairs up and up, Aloy climbs until she reaches the right room. She's been here once before, after the battle for the Spire, when Avad asked her to help him draw up a list of Nora casualties, and figure out what kind of supplies the Braves needed from Meridian – medicine, food, shards.

Sona refused all in the end, the Nora having come prepared enough to sustain themselves until they were able to hunt again. They left soon after.

Avad's study is similar to Marad's, but different, too. It feels more personal, simple touches such as a rug on the wall and a cushion on the wooden chair by the desk giving it a warmth the adviser's study lacks. That is to say nothing of the mess of scrolls and letters strewn across the desk and floor, making it almost impossible to reach the chair itself.

Left to her own devices, Aloy lets her Focus scan some of the letters, reading only the top parts of them. An inquiry, a submission, two neighbors bickering over life-stock... She snorts, imagining Avad trying to read through all of these on a daily basis and giving himself a headache.

Then again, Avad has to talk to a lot of people as well, which must be why he's running late again. A moment, he'd said, but he still hasn't arrived by the time she's found the third letter of a merchant who specializes in different kinds of dung and wants to patent his 'special blend', afraid someone will steal it.

Who'd even be interested in that?

Her mindless wandering takes her to the small window inside the study and the high table placed in front of it. There's a plant in a clay pot, the green leaves barely taking up more space than the spread of Aloy's fingers – a sapling. Next to the pot are some more letters, making Aloy roll her eyes in slight exasperation, but then the gentle breeze through the metal roster of the window shifts the sheets and her Focus lights up.

'Aloy.'

Her name, on a letter in Avad's study. The handwriting reminds her of the scrolls she found deep beneath the palace. Her curiosity overtaking her, she picks the letter addressed to her and starts reading it, skipping over words to make a quick assessment of its contents.

'You once said that although you had been told the historical facts... The horrors committed by Sun-King Jiran... my father...'

Avad wrote it, to her. It's a... confession? A warning? The ink isn't fresh, having seeped into the letter days, if not weeks ago, the edges of the sheet frayed as though someone has read it multiple
times but...

This was never sent to her.

Why?

Reading on, the last line of the opening says, 'This is my attempt to rectify this absence.'

Her mind sharpens, honing in on a single task – she must know what this letter says, and why Avad thought she needed to read it when he wrote it in the first place – and she forgets her meeting with the king as her eyes find their way back to the top of the letter.

She begins to read it again, this time taking in every word of it.

Chapter End Notes

The letter Aloy reads: *Of breaking and reforging* by Thoroneaquila

As a small side-note regarding the letter, Thoroneaquila and I decided it would fit into this universe as well after she'd already written it, and there's one paragraph in it where Avad mentions GAIA and Elisabet - which obviously hasn't happened in Second Dawn yet, as they are about to discuss those matters. Other than that, everything written in the letter is canon here as well.

I hope you guys enjoy reading the letter as well and if you do, please let Thoroneaquila know! I think she's a brilliant writer with a certain feeling for the historical elements that is just wonderful to read.

See you next week! :)
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

EDIT 28/JAN/2018: Hey all, I'm sorry - due to separate personal circumstances surrounding burbear and myself I won't be uploading the next chapter this Sunday. Next chapter will be up in a week, that should give both burbear and me enough time to get some rest and get our game faces back on 😊

Hi everyone! Sorry for not responding to all your lovely comments - I've been under the weather these past few weeks and it's been hitting me especially hard this last week. I'm in bed as I type this and in the very general discomfort that comes with being exhausted, so I'll be taking it easy today, uploading the chapter first and then slowly answering comments because those mean so much to me and always brighten my day. <3

I hope you all enjoy this chapter 😊

As always I am thankful to burbear for beta reading this chapter. You're my hero! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


Elisabet Sobeck: – can’t believe I did that. How did I not feel… am I broken, GAIA?

GAIA: You are functioning within given parameters. There are no signs of any system tampering.

Elisabet Sobeck: There must be something wrong with me.

GAIA: You are distressed, Elisabet. Please remember: humans are capable of hurting each other even when there is no intent or active thought behind doing so. The discussion you are currently engaged in is one of high importance.

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: You’re right. I’m emotionally compromised. After everything that happened today, I really shouldn’t be doing this, but… there is no other choice. Who knows how much time will pass before there’s another opportunity to speak with the king?

GAIA: Although scans indicate a period of rest would be beneficial, I understand your predicament. You are able to finish this discussion, Elisabet. You have done so before. Handle one task at a time.

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: I can do this. One by one.

GAIA: Yes, Elisabet.

Elisabet Sobeck: I’ll… start with a message to her… should apologize…
Avad’s Letter – [excerpt]

So now you have heard my story. It is not complete, but this is the best I can do at the moment. Some of its parts I cannot even think about, let alone talk or write. Maybe, hopefully, in a few years. If so, and if you are willing to listen, I will tell you then.

I miss you, Aloy. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, I hope you are well.

May you always walk in light.

---

There are moments in nature, times when the shift of the breeze changes. It will still. Birds return to their nests, their songs halting. All is quiet before a line of clouds on the horizon announces itself, coming in fast.

Rost taught her from a young age to always be wary of those moments, to keep a clear eye on the sky because when the moment arrives, the storm has already begun.

The last lines of the letter bring the same quiet with them but Aloy misses it, too entranced by the words written on the page. Avad wrote this, for her. Details of his history, his memories of a painful past. Of Kadaman, his brother, of Ersa, his beloved, and of his father who, even after inflicting so much tyranny, was still the one who had at one point cared for him.

The door to the stairwell opens and she freezes, recognizing the king by his steps and his words when he says, “I apologize for making you wait so long, I was – oh –”

Aloy turns to face him slowly, blinking sheepishly at being caught red-handed. “I ah...” She holds out the letter to him. “Found this,” she says. “It was lying there and uh...”

She doesn't know what else to say as Avad carefully takes the letter from her without meeting her eyes. “Right,” he says, the casual delivery of the word somehow forced. “I had... forgotten about that.”

It didn't read like the kind of letter someone would just forget about writing, or where they'd left it afterward.

“I saw my name on top of it and...”

Avad nods, the movement a tad too hasty for his usual composure. “Yes, of course. Well.” He gives her a smile that doesn't reach his eyes and moves forward to place the letter among a pile of others on his desk. “It is not of any immediate import, I promise you,” he says.

He's lying.

Maybe she shouldn't have read it after all.

She begins to say I'm sorry but Avad cuts her off, waving a hand in dismissal.

“I can hardly blame you for your interest in something addressed to you,” he says as he maneuvers around his desk, still somehow avoiding her even as he speaks to her. “But for now, let us speak of the matters at hand, or, the matter of your mother.”

“It's a long tale,” she warns, and Avad reaches down behind the desk to pull up a second pillow,
already having grabbed the one from his chair.

“Then, let us sit,” he says, placing both pillows on the open space in the middle of the study.

---

She tells him of the birth of the Faro machines, the Deathbringers and Corrupters, and how they threatened all life on earth. How the Old Ones fought against them, and how an idea was formed to defeat the machines: Project Zero Dawn.

She explains how HADES had been part of it, of the sub-function's task to help create a new world. She mentions the other sub-functions as well, and how they all played a part under the guidance of GAIA – the AI tasked with rebuilding the entire earth after the Faro Plague was defeated – but steers carefully clear of mentioning any locations beyond GAIA Prime.

It is obvious that Avad doesn't understand everything she says right away, but he never interrupts her, even when she tells him that when the time was right, GAIA breathed new life into the earth, releasing new humans and animals onto the land.

Finally, she describes the team of people who made it all possible, each with their specialty, and the very last one she mentions...

“Elisabet Sobeck,” she says softly. “The leader of their project. She was their Alpha Prime. She created GAIA and saved... us. Gave life on earth a second chance.”

Avad, seated across her with one knee drawn up to rest an arm on top, touches the back of his hand to his lips. “She... was,” he says. “Elisabet Sobeck died.”

She nods, because he's right. “All of this happened a thousand years ago,” she tells him. “The chances of her survival all those years would have been...”

“Impossible,” Avad finishes for her, his brow furrowing in thought. “And the woman you introduced as your mother?”

Of all the things she wants to explain, that's the one she struggles with the most. She wants to call Elisabet her mother, wants it to be true so badly – but to demand that of her would be selfish. After all, Elisabet never wanted the Lightkeeper protocol to be activated, and although the woman's warmth and attention keep surprising Aloy at every turn, this is something she cannot ask of her.

“GAIA brought her back,” is what she says. “When HADES and the others escaped from GAIA's grasp and she blew up the mountain, she was severely... injured. After I helped GAIA's return, she revived Elisabet.”

“A miracle,” Avad breathes. “These – doors, the ones built by the Old Ones, they would have opened on her – on Elisabet's – command, correct? Why do they open on yours?”

“Because I'm...” She trails off, her fingers tugging at a scab on the back of her hand. “GAIA couldn't bring Elisabet back at the time, so instead she commanded one of ELEUTHIA's Cradles to create... me. I'm of Elisabet's blood, and the doors think I'm her.”

Neither of them speaks for a moment, both taking in the words that were said – Avad, the revelations of the earth's rebirth and Aloy's bloodline, and Aloy, the fact that she told someone about it all.

Finally, Avad lowers his knee, tucking the foot underneath his other leg, and rests a hand on each thigh, just above the knee. “Thank you for sharing this with me, Aloy,” he says. “I will guard this
knowledge and keep it close to my heart. Not even Marad will hear of it.”

“And Saranah?” Aloy can’t help but ask, raising an eyebrow.

Avad freezes for a second, and then laughs, his upper body rocking back and forth.

“ Asking because she'll be your other half and all that,” Aloy adds, her tone flat but a smile tugging on her lips.

Taking a few deep breaths, Avad moves his head to the side and dabs with the knuckle of his first finger at the edges of his eyes, carefully avoiding the Carja markings there. “I only laugh at the notion because it had not even begun to cross my mind. No, Aloy, I will not share your secrets with my betrothed, not even when the day arrives that she will come to live here, nor on any day that follows.”

Now that they're speaking of Saranah, the discussion Aloy had with Talanah down in the halls of the palace comes back to the foreground of her mind, as does the idea that the woman Avad is set to marry is nothing like any other the king has shown interest in.

“Do you love her?” Aloy asks, and this time they both freeze, staring at each other. “You had wanted Ersa to be your queen, didn't you? What happened to that?”

Very carefully, Aloy sees the lines of tension in Avad's body relax, and he places both hands on his knees, the fingers lying on the fabric there loosely. “She's gone, Aloy,” he says in a much softer voice than usual. “My Ersa – she's gone into the Sun's embrace. You were there, and I...” He shakes his head. “Nothing will change that. Still, I love her – and miss her, dearly. Every day.”

Then why marry someone who will never be able to replace her? Why pretend to love Saranah?

She doesn't say the words because it already feels like she's asking too much, digging too deeply for wounds still bleeding at a sluggish pace, but Avad sees through her anyway.

“Once,” Avad says, “a long time ago, the Khane Sovaliys were asked to appear in the Sun-King’s court. This was after the Red Raids had started but before I had ever considered leaving. Before I met Ersa, in fact.

“They were asked to perform music before my father and the Sun after captives were... slaughtered in the Sun-Ring. It was an attempt to appease the Sun. The Priests had said a hymn would help calm the Sun's anger, and that music should play to fill the air. That the sounds may drift ever upward and into the light.

“Saranah was little more than a child, yet she held herself with the composure of a woman. She played perfectly and sang with a voice like summer's whispers. I didn't give it much thought, preoccupied by my own misery.

“It was years later that I realized the danger she had been in. If it had started to rain, if there had been any sign of the Sun's displeasure – if Saranah had played a wrong note, she might have been added to the next round of sacrifices.”

Avad pauses, giving Aloy the chance to process what he has told her so far. The idea of someone being killed for a change of weather or playing a single fault in a song is strange and... terrifying, although after reading the letter she feels like she's gotten a better understanding of what those times were like. This story only adds on to that.

“So you see, we both know how to perform, Saranah and I,” Avad says. “We both know loss, as
Aloy swallows, her throat dry all of a sudden. “That's awful. I can't even begin to imagine what that was like,” she mutters. Then she frowns as a different thought occurs to her. “Does Saranah want to marry you – does she love you?”

When Avad's eyes meet hers, they are gentle. “Saranah understands what the houses ask of her and what her duties are, as a queen to the Sun-King,” he says, which isn't really an answer, but he follows it up with, “After the houses decided, Saranah and I had a long discussion. Where my heart belongs to Ersa, so does hers belong to another. We will perform for the nobles but I will never force her to bear a child.”

“But,” Aloy protests, “the nobles will want an heir.”

“And I will appoint one when the moment arrives,” Avad says calmly. “Perhaps Itamen will take my place, perhaps someone else – however I will not harm the queen I am supposed to take care of in any way.”

Rising from her seat on the ground, Aloy rubs along her lower legs to get the blood flowing again. “You're a good person, Avad,” she says, and the king follows her example but not before she catches a glimpse of sadness on his face.

Sensing an end to their discussion, Avad moves ahead of Aloy, opening the door to the hallway. “I am no better than the next Carja.”

Standing in front of the doorway, Aloy regards him. His words just now might even be interpreted as blasphemous, for a Sun-King to liken himself to the common people, but maybe that's what makes him different. How he's willing to admit that, despite his status, he is only human and not some kind of extension of a god.

She wants to tell him that, but isn't sure how. In the end, she settles for, “See you tomorrow.”

---

The only source of light in the guestroom is the candles in Oseram sconces on the wall. Aloy notices someone has closed the shutters in front of the windows, keeping the draft at bay. She shuts the door quietly, seeing how Elisabet is already lying in bed, the duvet covering her form. Where the days of winter in Meridian are still warmer than most days of fall in the Sacred Land, nightfall arrives with a deceptive cold.

Rifling through their belongings it soon becomes clear that her undergarments haven't been returned after the bath, and Aloy huffs, chagrined. Instead she finds a plain Carja tunic folded into a neat rectangle on the low table. It smells faintly of the same herbs used in the baths.

It's better than nothing, she decides, and changes into the tunic before lying down on top of the duvet next to Elisabet. Her mind is still racing, the events of the day not ready to let her sleep. First, their arrival, then the baths, followed by Keshad and the engagement... somehow she keeps drifting back to the room beneath the palace, the drawings on the walls that show the darkest moments of history.

It's not the same as finding a hologram of the Old Ones, like Project Zero Dawn's, but still... So many deaths. So much suffering. What if this really is all there is to humanity? People who will try to do what is best and fail, others who do not think of their consequences – what if none of it matters, in the end?
Next to her, Elisabet turns over to face her and Aloy's breathing halts, afraid she's woken the woman.

“You took your time,” Elisabet says, not sounding like she'd been asleep at all.

The candles on the wall flicker, shadows moving in accordance to their light. Aloy breathes again. “Sorry.”

A slight shrug indicates the dismissal of her apology – Elisabet doesn't seem angry with her for coming back late. “Did you have a lot to talk about?”

She nods. To think that she didn't even ask about the letter. Perhaps if she had, they would've still been there, but... it's probably for the best she didn't. Not tonight.

“What did you discuss?” Elisabet asks, and this time there's something in her voice, something about the way she asks it, that gives Aloy the feeling Elisabet already knows at least a part of it.

“I...” Even though she had told herself she'd tell Elisabet about it later, now that the moment has arrived she's hesitating. “Faro's machines, where they came from. Project Zero Dawn, the sub-functions... and why the Old Ones' machines think I'm you, because I'm of your blood.”

Elisabet hums, rolling onto her side and propping herself up with her elbow. “Did you tell him things I did not want you to share?”

“No,” is her immediate answer, because she didn't, she didn’t talk about how he could find the sub-functions or how to defeat them, or even how GAIA decided to bring Elisabet back precisely, but then doubt creeps in, because she did tell him who Elisabet truly is. “I'm... not sure,” she admits.

The incline of Elisabet's face is a movement so small she would have missed it had there been anything else her attention was focused on. “How could you have been sure?” Elisabet asks, and her questions make sense now.

It's a lesson.

Aloy's hands fidget, fingernails tugging the scab on her hand just as they did earlier. She already knows the answer, but the words refuse to leave her throat.

By asking first.

All kinds of excuses come to mind: she trusts Avad, he would have figured it out anyway, he won't tell anyone...

And just like that, there's frustration as well brewing in the pit of her stomach. If she had told Avad these things before, back when they were hunting together in the Forbidden West, none of this would've been a problem. In fact, if she hadn't gone above and beyond, traveling to every corner of the discovered world, Elisabet might not have been here at all.

“I'm the one who fought HADES,” she says, trying to justify her actions. “I discovered – everything – alone, by myself –”

“And I created it,” Elisabet says softly, the way she looks at Aloy erasing the frustration and anger, leaving behind only a deep-seated sense of guilt. “Aloy, I understand. I'm not blaming you. I only ask that you consult me first, next time.”

“Sorry,” she says, squirming under Elisabet's gaze.
Elisabet hums again, lying back down, staring up at the silk canopy above them, her hands laced together on her chest. “GAIA asked if she should monitor your discussion and send it over to me. I told her not to, because I trust you. I won't ever ask GAIA to monitor any of your conversations, and I've also told GAIA not to share any information with outside parties.”

Aloy hadn't... thought about that. The idea that GAIA might have been monitoring her. She probably should have, given how she took precautions after learning Sylens had a back-door into her Focus, but somehow... she never felt the need to do that with GAIA.

It isn't betrayal she feels exactly at learning that GAIA is willing to record her conversations and hand them to Elisabet, but something pangs inside her chest. Maybe that's how Elisabet had felt as well, when she learned Aloy left to discuss things about her.

“I should have come to you first,” she mumbles half into one of the pillows.

Neither one of them speaks, but Elisabet reaches out across the duvet with her hand, nudging Aloy's until her hand is held within hers.

“Do you know what an NDA is?” Elisabet turns her head just enough to make eye contact. Aloy doesn't, and Elisabet continues. “A non-disclosure agreement. It's a contract, one everyone signed when they joined Zero Dawn. It means you're not allowed to talk about it with anyone outside of the... team. The workers.”

“Why?”

“Because the work we did there was... sensitive. No one on the outside was allowed to know. No friends, no family.”

A thought arises and Aloy frowns, staring at the side of Elisabet's hairline. “Do you want me to... do... one of those NDA contracts?”

Elisabet chuckles, her gaze cast upwards once more, tracing the glimmers of candlelight trapped in Carja silk. “That would be silly. There's no one left who'd enforce those rules. It's been a thousand years...” She trails off, her smile fading. “Though... only feels like a few months to me.”

Three moons since Aloy first saw Elisabet inside the Cradle, yet she already has a hard time imagining life without her. Aloy squeezes Elisabet's thumb in the palm of her hand, and Elisabet squeezes back.

“I'm glad you're here,” Aloy whispers.

Elisabet’s eyes are closed, and Aloy can see her chest rise as she breathes in deeply. “I am too, Aloy,” Elisabet says, squeezing her hand again. “I know there wasn't much time today to coordinate statements or... check with each other, and you're used to dealing with these kinds of scenarios on your own. You're very capable and I don't want to take that away from you, but things like Project Zero Dawn or... what GAIA did to bring me back, those are as much a part of your life as they are mine.”

“I didn't tell him everything. I didn't tell him about your body, or – ”

“It's okay, Aloy,” Elisabet interrupts her. “Just – next time you wish to discuss our history, where you come from, where I come from... Project Zero Dawn... talk to me first. That way we both have a say in what should be shared and what shouldn't.”

Aloy nods, but like an insect's sting the unease remains. She considers asking GAIA to share the
conversation anyway, to assure Elisabet of what was and wasn't said in her conversation with Avad. Before she can do so however, Elisabet continues speaking.

“Maybe next time someone asks you to help them capture a dangerous criminal with possible cultist ties and they tell you it's a secret mission – maybe... tell me as well?” she says in a lighter tone, squeezing Aloy's hand again. “The 'Buried Shadow,' what was that all about, anyway? Could've at least gone with something that makes them sound more like a cartoon villain, like 'Naysay Doom,' for example...”

Even though Elisabet's words aren't as serious as they were before, Aloy still gleans the underlying message.

“I should've told you about what Vanasha wanted me to do because we're...” She struggles to find the right word, stuck between family and werak.

“A team,” Elisabet supplies for her, and sure, that works as well, even if it doesn't feel quite as important as the other two. “You and me and GAIA. We're in this together.”

“Sorry I didn't,” she mumbles, rubbing her free hand across her forehead. “'s like I only did things wrong, today.”

“There's room for improvement,” Elisabet says, “but you did a lot of good, too. We're... two captains, trying to steer the same ship. Of course we're bound to run aground sometimes before figuring out all the controls.”

As if on cue, both their Focus devices light up and an image of a small boat with two figures running around on top appears. Every time one figure has changed course with the steering oar and leaves to do something else, the second one comes along the change the direction the opposite way – and so on.

Aloy snorts at the image. It doesn't seem very effective for either captain, and if that's what she's been doing all day with Elisabet it's no wonder it feels like she messed up so much, looking back. The holo-image disappears.

“We'll get there, eventually. You did good, Aloy.” There's a beat, and then she looks at Aloy once more and frowns, but it's not a real one – Aloy has learned to distinguish the two – and taps their held hands on top of the duvet. “But why aren't you under the covers yet? You're gonna catch your death of cold.”

Aloy can feel her face break out into a grin and she scrambles to hands and knees, crawling under the duvet. It's only when the warmed cloth touches her bare arms that she notices how much her skin has cooled. She draws her knees to her chest, trying to trap all the heat she can find to warm herself, and Elisabet laughs at her antics, drawing the duvet up over her own arms and raising one, creating a hole beneath the covers next to Elisabet's body.

“C'mere, you silly goose,” Elisabet says, and Aloy scoots over. “No reason to stay cold when I'm a living furnace.”

She's right – Elisabet's body is warm like the glow of a fire, and Aloy nestles herself against the woman's side.

“There's only one more thing I wanted to talk about, and then we should sleep,” Elisabet says as her arms wrap around Aloy with care. “I'm... I apologize for hurting you, earlier.”

Aloy frowns, confused by her words. “You already did,” she says.
“Doesn’t matter,” Elisabet says, her chin touching the top of Aloy’s head. “It shouldn’t have happened in the first place. I said I would never hurt you and I failed.”

“You didn’t mean to hurt me.”

“But I did, and it was still wrong,” Elisabet stresses. “What I’m trying to ask – can you forgive me?”

There’s a moment of silence as Aloy considers Elisabet’s request. While it seems unnecessary to her, when she imagines herself in Elisabet’s situation, imagines a situation where she managed to hurt her, however accidental that may be… she isn’t sure if she’d feel better after a single apology.

“Of course,” she answers, hugging Elisabet back. “I already did.”

Chapter End Notes

EDIT 28/JAN/2018: as stated above: hey all, I’m sorry - due to separate personal circumstances surrounding burbear and myself I won’t be uploading the next chapter this Sunday. Next chapter will be up in a week, that should give both burbear and me enough time to get some rest and get our game faces back on c;

Next up: Elisabet’s POV!
Hey everyone, I'm back c': finally answering all your wonderful and supportive comments again - thank you for those, and for your kind words. I hope the wait was worth it.

As always, so much love for burbear. You're a champ, my bro. <3

Sobeck Journal, 12-25-41

Aloy is a living legend and she's a young woman, still growing into her own identity. There's an honest certainty in her step when she moves towards a goal, one that's impossible to fake and only gained through experience, but at the same time she stumbles in unknown territory, almost causing a panic by attempting small talk.

Is it bad that for a moment I wished she was able to wind an audience around her finger with no trouble instead of knowing how to hold a knife? Instead of how to twist a grab at her throat into a defense?

God, what I would sacrifice to give her a childhood without the need to develop those skills.

GAIA cut off my audio feed to her Focus during that fight, and with good reason. I was... beyond panicked. I would have only served as a distraction in my attempts to warn her because she was already aware. She knew what to do, how to move. She didn't need me, and I wasn't able to help her.

GAIA's outcome percentages were positive – I don't think she ever truly 'worried', being able to predict a new outcome in less than a second, and Aloy was clearly gaining the upper hand quickly – but none of that mattered to me when there was even the slightest chance of this man killing her. And he wanted to kill her. The intent was there, and Aloy was unfazed, like there's someone out there who wants her dead every other week.

I hate how desensitized she is to the violence and I hate that she knows how to fight and I hate that other people use this aspect of her for their own gain and I hate that I can't help her.

I'm whining in my own journal like a child that didn't get the right toy on Christmas, which, hah. Funny, given today's date. I want to be there for her and what good am I if I can't even do that?

Then I lost control a second time, which, fuck, I could fling myself off a rock for that one. How did I not notice that I was fucking pinching her? GAIA gives me a wonderful, beautiful nervous system and then I don't fucking use it. The flip side to this is that GAIA gave me a way to experience true to life anxiety and guess what – it still sucks ass.

Where's my fucking Xanax, GAIA?

I know, I shouldn't joke about that. Good thing no one reads these journals. I could be writing something useful here like little blurbs about Carja society (written with a C as I've learned and not a
K as I presumed) but instead I complain about my feelings.

Ugh.

At least Ted isn't here to ruin meetings by barging in to talk about his dick size. I mean, inflate his own ego. Rest in pieces, you fucking bastard.

Can't help wondering how he died...

---

Elisabet pauses her typing, her free hand hovering in the air, the other resting on the top of Aloy's head. She's safe, asleep in her arm, a welcomed weight against Elisabet's side. It wasn't just an offering to Aloy to snuggle up for warmth, although Elisabet sure didn't want the girl to think otherwise. Being able to hold her means she's alive and breathing.

She's been careful not to let it leak through again, her own feelings on the matter, not after that moment before the feast.

Besides, *writing a journal is cathartic*, she reminds herself in Samina's voice.

Oh, Sam...

What would she have to say about all this? It's pointless to try and imagine it all but it’s so easy to conjure up the image of the woman's face and pretend...

She closes her eyes and stops breathing, the steady rhythm of her mechanical heart continuing, and waits for the pressure in her head to start building, but it never does. Nor the closed off feeling in her throat, nor the vacuum of her lungs demanding more air.

“Elisabet,” comes GAIA's voice over the Focus, soft as though she's sitting right next to her. “Are you all right?”

*No, I'm not.*

Her emotions are getting worse. Or, alternatively, more real. Isn't that in itself a symptom of depression, or maybe a sign of recovery *from* depression? Fuck if she knows, she can't remember half of what the team therapist told her during the first months of Zero Dawn. Maybe today was just a bad day.

“I don't know what to do,” she whispers with air she didn't need to breathe in. “God, what am I doing? Pretending to know best in a world I hardly recognize, acting the way I did before...”

What if she fucks it up, somehow?

*Fucks what up,* her mind retorts, and yeah, what, exactly? This isn't Zero Dawn, life on earth isn't counting down on a timer till it'll all stop, and yet... somehow it feels the same. Her actions during the meeting with the king and his adviser only confirm that, with how she reacted.

Was she being cautious, or paranoid?

“I believe your actions brought forth most promising conditions to continue our work,” GAIA says.

Using a two-fingered gesture to swipe through the text in her journal entry, Elisabet shakes her head, barely registering GAIA's words. “I walked out in the middle of a meeting again, how is that okay? Am I losing it?”
The Focus interface disappears without her command and she blinks as her vision adjusts to the relative darkness.

“When did you last sleep, Elisabet?”

Was it... she didn't actually sleep that night outside the little town, so in the inn at the gate they encountered on the way to Meridian – what was it called, Morning's Watch? The fact that she isn't able to recall it as quick as she'd like should really be enough of an indicator, and she lowers the hand she used to control her Focus with.

She hasn't slept in almost a week.

The human brain is severely impaired at just seventy-two consecutive hours of being awake.

Laughter starts to build deep within her stomach without permission, and she covers her mouth, biting down on a knuckle to keep it all in. God, for fuck's sake, Lis.

Aloy stirs in her arms and it's only at the panic of not wanting to explain herself to the girl that the laughter dissipates. “Shhh, sleep, Aloy,” she whispers, turning her head towards the girl's and pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Sleep, sleep.

---

Her dreams, if she can call them that, are filled with short recollections of the past week, flashes of the desertscape and machines in the distance. Those are followed by moments in the palace – the fight, the feast, mixed into one mass of people and violence, Faro machines awakening to join the fun, but through the blood and gore Elisabet is called to MINERVA's communications array, a call that pulls her closer and closer...

When she wakes she isn't distressed, having experienced much worse in both nightmares and daylight before, and instead stares at the silky canopy above the bed. The candles have gone out, the first signs of light creeping in through the crack between the shutters and the windows.

A clarity emerges from her mind, one with which she reviews her actions in the king's court so far and... it's probably for the best, her wariness when it comes to sharing information. Besides, the king has already agreed to her – their – terms.

Aloy is still asleep, an arm slung across Elisabet's chest, breathing easy and undisturbed even when Elisabet gently nudges her to roll over. There are some unintelligible mutterings but no signs of her actually gaining consciousness. Elisabet pulls the covers up to tuck them in around her, keeping her warm while providing herself the freedom to sit upright in bed.

She opens her Focus menu and settles in to write a short rapport on the Carja.

By the time she's almost finished, Aloy is gradually waking, first rolling around in bed until she sees Elisabet and – the glare she gives her is magnificent, but only caused by the girl's eyes refusing to open more than a crack.

Doesn't make it any less hilarious to look at.

Elisabet continues her typing while casually observing Aloy's morning ritual, which now consists of burrowing back underneath the duvet and complaining to herself, the words spoken into her pillow and clearly not meant to address anyone else.
Their handmaiden, Udina, comes and goes with near silent footsteps, first lighting the candles, then bringing in two sets of clothing in neat bundles and leaving them on the small table. Then she moves closer to the bed and whispers if Elisabet has any preferences for food or drink.

When she asks for kahwa, she's greeted by confusion at first but then Udina's cheer returns and the handmaiden leaves with a short bow.

Elisabet had briefly considered telling her anything would do, but the chance to drink coffee – and proper one at that, made from actual beans – isn't something she wants to let pass her by, even if she can't really feel the effects of the beverage on her new body. *It's the thought that counts*, her mind sings to her in a voice that is familiar, but could be anyone from before.

Exiting her Focus menu, Elisabet slips from the bed and undresses quickly, folding the tunic in half twice before setting it down next to the fresh clothes. There's a bundle with more blue and one with more orange, and going on a hunch Elisabet takes the blue one.

The dark trousers are a pleasant surprise, as are the soft leather shoes with a thick sole. There's a dark blue top with a turtleneck and... some kind of protective knotted armor to wear around her waist. It's made of cloth wrapped around leather, which, okay. It's no UltraWeave but she's seen much more fragile materials used as gear in the past few years.

To top it all off there's a light blue garment that looks like a short jacket with long, puffy sleeves.

Well.

Who says you can't survive the actual apocalypse and look fashionable?

Udina arrives with her coffee just as Elisabet was about to try the jacket on and she's immediately offered help. It's easier to accept it than try to refuse at this point, so she holds perfectly still while Udina expertly dresses her and closes the jacket's closures at the front.

“Thank you,” Elisabet says once she's done, and the girl's smile is radiant.

“Our Sun-King has assigned a troop of soldiers to accompany you to the Spire today,” Udina not-quite whispers. “They are ready to leave whenever you are, waiting for you near the bridge into the city.”

Thanking her again, Elisabet watches the handmaiden leave, closing the door behind her quietly. She picks up her coffee, the heat of the beverage seeping through the glass cup to a point where she'd have had to set it down before. Now she enjoys the tingling sensation beneath her skin.

The coffee served to her now is less bitter than it was last night. She can tell by the smell alone that someone added sugar to it, but none of that changes that fact that it's *actual coffee* in her hands and not some powdered, rationed nonsense that only contained caffeine and zero taste.

She’s not sure this coffee would win a prize in the taste department either, but... beggars and choosers, and all that.

Setting it down for now, Elisabet moves over to the bed and sits down on the edge. “Did you hear what Udina said?” she asks, and the lump under the covers shifts. “We gotta go, it's rude to keep them waiting.”

The silence that follows tells all and Elisabet rises, opening the shutters from the windows to let some daylight in. Any red hair that was visible above the duvet now disappears inside the nest Aloy has created for herself.
“That's it, up you get,” Elisabet says, speeding the process along by pulling the duvet off of Aloy's upper body, letting cool air breeze through Aloy's tunic, the morning chill to serve as a motivation to get dressed.

Aloy groans in protest, rolling onto her side, yawning. She tries to shrug the duvet back over her shoulders, but in response Elisabet simply takes away the comfort in its entirety, rolling it down all the way to the bottom of the bed. The glare Aloy tries to give her now is more sincere than her earlier attempt.

Elisabet leaves the side of the bed for a moment to retrieve her coffee and holds it under Aloy's nose. “Here, I've got something for you.”

All it takes is one sniff for Aloy’s face to crumble into honest disgust. “Awful,” the girl croaks. “Spiteful.”

“It'll wake you up,” Elisabet sing-songs, but Aloy moves out of reach, rolling off the other side of the bed and stumbling over to the table with all the grace of a newborn deer. There she stops and mutters something along the lines of damn this cold before looking at the clothes.

“These yours?” Aloy grumbles.

“Already wearing mine,” Elisabet answers, and sips her coffee while Aloy shrugs once and sets herself to work, getting dressed with far more ease than Elisabet did.

Upon leaving the room, Udina hands Elisabet a meal wrapped in cloth, to be shared by the two of them, and sends them on their way to meet the soldiers out front. They are hard to miss, a group of six standing around, loitering, the young men clearly bored from having to wait so long, but as soon as one of them spots Aloy, they stand to attention, one of them hastily putting his helmet back on.

At ease, rests on Elisabet's tongue, but she doesn't let it out, instead having Aloy decide their actions as they set out on foot.

The city is already moving, merchants setting up their stalls and wares. Machine parts line the alleyways, some small enough to be held in Elisabet’s palm, others twice the size of her. A woman wearing plain cotton garments walks past her holding a crate full of oranges, leaving a citrusy scent in her wake.

There's a bespectacled man with an impressive beard who seems to be selling old mugs... like, pre-apocalypse ones. He must've caught her staring at the two mugs on display behind him because he calls out to her and says, “Have you ever come across these vessels during your travels?”

“Not interested,” she calls back before jogging a few paces to catch up to Aloy and the rest. There's a lot more to see, like weapons and armor being sold, or spices and fruits. Wicker baskets and bamboo fans, stone and iron axes and tools. Elisabet silently vows to come back later by herself so she can properly admire the wares, but for now they're headed towards two towers at the edge of the mesa.

For a second she believes she imagined the wooden cage inside one of the towers moving but then it turns out she is in fact looking at an elevator. Made out of wood. They're actually going to be taking one to go down to the village next to the city, and Elisabet feels somewhat lucky to be able to admire such ingenuity up close.

But like a counterweight to all the beauty seen so far, the ruins of the farmers' village are more like home than anything else. Bullet holes in stone, debris left in piles to be cleared later, the main focus of the workers being to make everything functional again. There's an entire field that was once
farmland but is now overrun with weeds, the greenery barely covering the corpse of a Khopesh.

It's only when Aloy comes up to her that she's aware of having stopped walking. There's concern in the girl's eyes and Elisabet dismisses it quietly.

They head on, getting closer to the communications array. The Spire.

There's a path leading up to the mesa where the tower's built on, and it's guarded by several other soldiers, ones wearing heavier, less ornamental armor than the Carja escorting them. Cheers erupt from somewhere up along the path to the Spire and Aloy tilts her head towards it.

Not long after, a mountain of a man pushes past the guards in front, heading straight for Aloy. The man is dressed similar to the other guards but he probably outranks them, based on their behavior.

“Aloy!” the man cries in a loud, booming voice, and without warning embraces her, lifting her off the ground in a swift second.

Just when Elisabet starts to wonder if she should intervene, the man sets her down again, and Aloy socks her fist against his shoulder, grinning.

As she moves closer, Elisabet recognizes him as well. It's the same man who stood next to the king during their holo-call. He's... bigger, in person. A lot more muscle than she'd expected, especially compared to the Carja she'd been around all day yesterday.

She can hear Aloy introduce her as she approaches and the man smiles at her, just the hint of nerves around the edges of his expression. “Nice to meet you,” she says once she's crossed the appropriate distance, and holds out her hand.

The silence that follows is all she needs to know that she fucked up, because so far she hasn't had the chance to see anyone shake hands beyond Sylens, and even though she doesn't know their dubious ally well she knows he's a fucking nerd for her fallen civilization.

This man, however, clearly isn't, and neither are the guards surrounding them. She's about to retract her hand when he takes a step forward and extends his own with a nervous laugh.

“Is this a... Nora greeting?” he asks as they clasp hands and it kinda... stays there. An awkward gesture between the two of them.

Elisabet doesn't feel like shaking a hand that will only react like a limp fish, so she lets it be and says, “Not exactly Nora. I'm Elisabet.”

“Erend,” the man says.

“... you can let go now.”

He releases her hand immediately and steps back again. Luckily for both, Aloy places herself between them.

“Erend is the captain of Avad's Vanguard,” she says, and okay. That explains why he seemed to be close with the king. Sort of. “He's also an Oseram, just like all the members of the Vanguard.”

That explains even more. “I thought I recognized the style of armor,” she says, taking the time to check out the boots and steel plates. It looks a lot more sturdy than what the Carja are wearing. She's able to tell the difference now, having been up close with Oseram armor before.
“I take it you’re a fan,” Erend says, clapping his hands together once. Much of his initial awkwardness melts away now that he’s able to say something about a topic he’s clearly invested in. “Any one of these men can tell you – for their gear to be truly effective, you’re gonna need Oseram steel.”

“I recently got my own set,” Elisabet says, remembering the care Petra took to assemble it. “It’s being cleaned right now, but... felt a little safer when I was wearing that.” She gives the man a wink at the end of her sentence and...

Oh yeah, he definitely isn’t completely comfortable with her yet. He laughs and then changes topics in the blink of an eye. “Long way up ahead of us,” he says, pointing out the route along the mesa. “Best get going.”

The Carja soldiers follow behind her, Aloy leading at the front with Erend. The two seem to know each other well, with Aloy easily firing off questions and answers. Elisabet tries hard not to listen to their conversation but it’s impossible to miss the loud, ‘I told you I’d have at least a minute or two to talk to you’ Aloy practically yells at the man, a wide grin on her face as she bumps shoulders with him.

Erend was right – the way to the Spire is long, the path taking twists and turns, some of it showing heavy signs of destruction as temporary wooden walkways and beams connect one part of the mesa to the next.

“Crypts are still intact,” Elisabet hears Erend say. “A miracle really, after what went on up there.”

Closer to their destination now, Elisabet notices the solemn look Aloy’s sporting. It makes sense. Every occasion where the battle with HADES was mentioned, the name always conveyed that it was about the Spire. A battle for the Spire.

This must be their ground zero.

The last part of their climb involves some rickety wooden stairs built against a slab wall, and then – Elisabet's eyes shoot up, following the length of the communications array. She feels the ache of breathlessness in her chest, the air around her colder than it was before. It's... magnificent. Real.

The culmination of their work, the one thing that was absolutely necessary for life on earth to be given a second chance.

This is what they lived, bled, and died for. Why millions of people had to be thrown in front of Faro's meat grinders. The images of massacres around the world are still embedded deep in her mind and they'll never leave her, but seeing the Spire...

The victory they endured for.

Clenching her jaw, she keeps her eyes on the top of the Spire a little longer, the sunlight reflected there making her vision become mostly white.

_Fuck you, Ted_, she thinks. _Fixed your fucking mess even with your god damn meddling._

Aloy is calling her over, having moved ahead into the open court, and after taking one last moment to send her thoughts Ted's way, Elisabet lowers her gaze, blinking multiple times as she follows Aloy.

Heading for the foot of the Spire, at first she thinks it's a trick of the light, a spot burned into her
vision from staring into the sun too long, but the reality turns out to be far worse when she sees the wreckage of a Khopesh lying in the middle of the court.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Surprise :D It's a double update! I honestly feel a bit bad about not responding as quickly as I usual do (or you know, within a week) and all that, so here's two chapters for the price of one c':

Again, a big shout-out to burbear. This wouldn't have been possible without them and I'm so grateful they said they were up to the job to do two chapters in one week. Thank pal! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Elisabet observes herself from outside her body, moving in on the Khopesh, tearing at its body, fingers digging into cracks and breaking the hell-spawn open. Ripping out every wire the blasted thing needs to run its circuits.

Using whatever she can find to take off every. Single. Gun.

The chain of events replays in her mind three times, and every time she gets near the core of the machine she finds her feet still frozen to the same spot of stone in the courtyard.

The Khopesh has taken heavy fire but she can't take her eyes off of it, sure it'll start to move if she isn't guarding it.

God, she's seen thousands of these, spilling out of Horus units like ants, mowing down anything in their path.

Aloy calls her name again and this time Elisabet is able to make herself move, but she isn't heading over to Aloy. Not yet. It has to be safe first.

The Khopesh is toppled over onto its side, half of its legs hanging useless in the air. It's still more than the machine deserves, because it deserves to be obliterated. One of the main guns is completely missing, the one in the middle of its body damaged enough that the barrels are dented inward and bent.

Reaching the machine, Elisabet has to climb on top of pieces of it until she can reach her arms behind the middle turret and tug it out of the way. She's seen the schematics often enough, knows where the weaknesses are, and –

There, behind the gun and up, that's the closest spot that'll reach the main computer. Her fingers find metal and bolts, and she can't break through. But – she's no longer human. Her body is much stronger, she should be able to...

Pulling back slightly, Elisabet readies herself to strike the protective plating when GAIA's voice halts her.

“Elisabet,” the AI says. “You will hurt yourself.”

She frowns. What does it matter if she sustains injuries, all she needs to do is – “ – kill this thing.”
“It has already been disabled,” GAIA tells her, and sure, it's sleeping, for now. Who knows when it'll start to repair itself and start shooting people – kids – transforming them into fuel, uncaring if its victims are dead or alive, tearing them apart limb from limb...

The images keep coming back and before she's even aware of what she's doing, Elisabet finds herself bracing against parts of the Khopesh's body, kicking her foot against the gun full force until it gives way. She won't let it win again.

She expects Aloy to try and stop her when the girl climbs onto the Khopesh next to her, but instead she has her spear in hand and says, “Here. Let me.”

The spear is jammed into the hull above the gun, a spot that has thicker protection than the plate Elisabet's been trying to reach, but... the metal is already weakened. Dented. All Aloy needs to do to expose the inner workings is move one chunk of armored plating to the side and –

Elisabet climbs up, thrusting her arm inside, hears the fabric of her jacket tear but she doesn't stop until her fingers reach what she's been searching for. It's... missing?

No, broken. Her fingers catch on a piece of it and she pulls it out, staring in wonder at the most powerful piece of engineering inside this machine.

Aloy nods her head towards it, leaning her spear against the machine's body. “The heart. I destroyed it,” she says, almost causing Elisabet to smile at the name she's given it. How fitting.

“You killed it,” she murmurs, the strength that possessed her seeping away now there’s no longer a goal to achieve. “You knew what to do.”

“It's a machine,” the girl says, lending her a hand to climb back down to the ground. “All machines have a weakness.”

That's still not enough. She needs to see the Khopesh disassembled in its entirety, every screw and bolt keeping that nightmare together laid bare, and then melt it. Destroy it.

The realization of how much she's withdrawn into herself only comes when she's lured out again, sitting on a fallen pillar at the edge of the courtyard. Aloy is with her, the girl's hands wrapped around Elisabet's wrists, thumbs stroking over the pulse points in a soothing rhythm. Her own hands are curled into tight fists, the joints locked under the strain.

The guards are positioned away from them, out of hearing range, the soldiers very decidedly minding their own business. The only one who keeps glancing over at them is the captain, but even he is giving them space.

Aloy is telling her a story or... an account of the battle, explaining to her in detail how she defeated the machines and HADES. The words barely register, but hearing the lull of them is better than her own thoughts, filled with screams of the fallen.

Maybe she really is losing it. Maybe there's something in her code that is making her break down.

GAIA isn't interfering but the AI is present, lingering on the Focus line, available if necessary but letting Aloy handle the fallout...

Elisabet closes her eyes. She should give the energy she has left a clear goal, not waste it on analyzing everything just because she can. The heat signature next to her; she can feel it on her own... skin. It's real, and she leans into it until her forehead rests against Aloy's shoulder.
She slowly restarts her breathing and sets to work, releasing points of tension in her body one by one. A shudder ripples through her spine, and one of Aloy's hands comes up to embrace her shoulders. *She's real,* Elisabet tells herself. The battle has been won.

Aloy leaves for a moment when Elisabet is able to keep herself upright and breathing again, coming back with a leather waterskin. “Just drink it,” Aloy says when she tries to refuse. “You'll feel better.”

She's right. Drinking some water does, in fact, help her calm down further. Did GAIA tell her to do that? Elisabet wouldn't put it past her, and she's glad for the AI's thoughtfulness.

After another drink she passes the waterskin back. Flashes from a night not that long ago surface, and Elisabet attempts a smile. “I think I could say... I told you so,” she says. Aloy smiles back, but clearly doesn't understand what she means, so she adds, “That I fall apart too. I'm a mess, I'm...”

Her voice breaks, a first since she's gotten this body. She swallows the rest of her words. They're too self-pitying anyway, but Aloy understands, reaching for her hand.

“Now you put the pieces back together again,” Aloy says, “but you don't have to do it alone.”

They have each other, and it means more to Elisabet than she could have imagined it would back when they first met. They can lean on each other, provide an understanding no one else can.

Elisabet squeezes Aloy's hand. “Let’s do what we came for.”

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They set out to work slowly, first exploring the surrounding area. There's a dead computer core of a Horus at the Spire's foot. Somehow that's different from seeing a full-bodied Khopesh, but Elisabet still wants the damn thing rolled off the edge of the mesa.

It stays, for now.

Learning that this is how HADES housed itself after breaking free from GAIA is... frustrating. She hates seeing Faro's tech here, hates knowing that HADES had planned to use those bots to wipe the earth clean again, but she's also proud.

Proud of the sub-function's inventiveness, its ability to survive like that. She can only hope its siblings found different methods of survival because the prospect of having to deal with a different sub-function inside a Faro 'bot is distressing, to say the least.

The act of approaching the base of the tower carries more significance for Elisabet than she anticipated, climbing the foot to reach the actual Spire reminiscent of stairs leading up to a church or temple. Her Focus shows her the inner workings that are hidden from human eyes by enforced steel plating, and she steps forward, holding one hand out. There's an energy, something she can't explain, and it's... calling her.

She touches the plating, first with one hand, then with both, and now the energy is flowing into her body through her palms. It's a warmth, a presence, something familiar...

Her fingers spread out, assessing the ridges on the triangular face of the tower. “GAIA?” she asks quietly, and the response is immediate. A wave of power, a strength combined with something she can only describe as love, pushes forth and engulfs her.

*YES, ELISABET.*
She gasps at the foreign feeling, the way GAIA’s entity somehow merges with all the edges of her mind, holding her in an embrace she has never felt before. It’s her; GAIA, no doubt about it. Elisabet leans against the tower, pressing her body to its surface, and closes her eyes.

Her mind transports to a place, a field like the view inside a Focus’ hologram, triangles making up hexagons and forming a large sphere around her. The sky is a galaxy with thousands of stars offering her their light. Shimmers of code flit across the edges of the sphere like tails of comets on a clear frosty night. Her footsteps have an echo when she stumbles forward a few paces, but she can’t actually feel the rest of her body.

To her left is a pillar of glowing blue light – the communications array, a beacon of hope – and to her right...

A face so familiar to her it hurts.

GAIA, with her usual calm, steps forward, surrounded by a green robe that flows against the laws of physics but – all of that be damned, Elisabet can’t stop herself from rushing towards the AI, only coming to a halt just before they would touch.

GAIA smiles. It’s a relatively small gesture, especially coming from the AI who rebooted the world, but it is so very sincere. Awe expands inside Elisabet’s being, every tendril of her mind thrumming with emotion as she watches GAIA. There’s so much she wants to say, so many words for thank you that cross her mind, and GAIA’s arms reach out to her.

Elisabet welcomes the embrace but it’s more than just that – it’s the presence of the AI touching where her own ends, and for a moment she is so much more, a glimpse of a universe far beyond her own – a thousand years of solitude, a thousand years of devotion, a thousand years of hope, and her face at the foreground of so many thoughts and commands.

“GAIA,” she whispers, pressing even closer, unable to feel their bodies touching, but what does that matter when their souls are?

IN YOU, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE, are the words spoken directly into her being and she can feel the truth ringing behind them.

I WILL NEVER BRING YOU HARM. I WILL NEVER ALTER YOUR SELF WITHOUT PERMISSION. SEE, ELISABET? SEE...

“I can,” she chokes out, laughter and sorrow and grief and joy, so much joy beyond what was ever a possibility in her world. “I believe you, I...”

The image of GAIA smiles and touches her lips to Elisabet's cheek, lingering a moment, and although the physical touch is lacking, the intent is present in its entirety. Elisabet laughs without thinking about it, placing her own hand along the side of GAIA’s jawline, holding her. The universe is reflected in GAIA’s eyes in all its horror and glory.

Not for the first time, and it won’t be the last time either, Elisabet wishes she could cry and shed some of her feelings. They are filling her beyond the brim of her cup, and she wishes, fiercely, that she could flow over, to share the happiness in her heart.

“Kosi r’vaya,” she whispers instead, and GAIA responds by kissing her crown.

A hand on her body's shoulder, outside of this place, starts to pull her away from the center of her world. Her instinct is to protest it but GAIA’s warmth encourages her to go, the phrase I AM ALWAYS WITH YOU resonating inside the sphere.
 Darkness grows when she nears the edge of the realm and she embraces it, the last thing she sees before closing her eyes GAIA’s face, tranquil and serene.

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“Elisabet? Elisabet – are you okay?”

The metal is cold against her skin, the scent of iron swallowing her. The ground beneath her feet is soft and when she opens her eyes, the light is blinding. Elisabet blinks, adjusting her vision until she can see Aloy next to her in full clarity.

“How long was I gone?” she asks, and Aloy frowns, dropping the hand from her shoulder.

“You – weren’t,” the girl says. “You went up to the Spire and touched it, just now. I was talking to you and you didn’t respond.” There’s a pause. “Did you see something?”

Her senses are returning to their normal states but GAIA’s warmth remains, filling her chest with an ache, a pressure against her ribs. Elisabet steps back from the Spire and the feeling stays even when she’s no longer touching the plating.

“She's here,” she says to Aloy. “GAIA – she's in there. I could see her when I...” She demonstrates touching the communications array and the energy replies, brushing against her own. It's almost redundant when GAIA arrives on their shared Focus network as well.

“I apologize, Aloy,” the AI says. “I am not able to show myself to you the way I did to Elisabet because of our different physiologies.”

“That's fine,” Aloy answers with a wry smile, stepping away from the tower. “I've seen what can happen to humans before.”

For a moment Elisabet wonders what Aloy might mean by that, but then the awe of seeing GAIA… of feeling her… Even now, stepping away from the Spire, it’s still overpowering, and she needs to take a break to recollect herself – not in the same way as she did during her discussion with Sylens, or the one with the king and his adviser, but one in a much more positive light.

They have a late breakfast on the edge of the mesa, sitting near a ridge that overlooks the city. Udina packed them a little bit of everything, it seems. Bread and oil, fresh herbs and beans and dried fruit. There’s often a sense of guilt Elisabet experiences when she eats because she doesn’t technically need to, but this time it’s GAIA’s quiet approval that makes her finish the whole of her share.

After the meal the three of them discuss tactics, ways to find out where MINERVA actually is, because GAIA might be present in the tower but her former sub-function is nowhere to be found. It had of course been highly unlikely to find MINERVA inside the array in the first place, the towers not meant for sustaining an AI completely. They are arrays, after all.

What does bring her some surprise is the fact that they can’t find a trace of MINERVA’s activities concerning the Spire after August 26th, 3020. Did the sub-function abandon her arrays altogether when GAIA Prime fell?

Of all the data GAIA has managed to retain or gather since her revival, coordinates of the other communications arrays are not among them. GAIA tells them there are files hidden inside the Spire but they're heavily encrypted, all dating back before August 3020.

Elisabet joins with GAIA once more – not to a level quite as deep as before, but enough for their edges to blend. It's easy to fall into a rhythm together as they try to find the right key for the right file.
MINERVA didn't cut corners on her encryptions which isn't strange, given the fact that the sub-function was designed to decipher the deactivation codes for the Faro Swarm.

While her encryptions aren't beyond GAIA's capabilities, some of them are very cleverly designed variations on the polyphasic entanglement waveforms used by the Swarm, and GAIA admits that, if she were working alone on these, she'd be slower than when they are working together.

Elisabet snorts at that, doubt bleeding through their bond, but it's GAIA's instant reassurance that gives her pause.

*IT IS YOUR HUMAN MIND WITH ITS PROPENSITY TO SEEK A DIFFERENT PATTERN THAT GIVES US AN ADVANTAGE.*

Humbled by the praise – because the AI never says meaningless things, and right now she can feel as much as hear the truth behind it – Elisabet actually falls behind on their task for a little bit. GAIA helps her get back on track, the AI's gentle amusement palpable.

This time their connection was considerably longer than the first, confirmed by Aloy's look of utter boredom when Elisabet steps away from the Spire, sporting a light headache after being immersed for so long.

“I'm sorry,” Elisabet says, somewhat self-conscious, but Aloy shrugs it off.

“If I'm not needed here I can do other things,” she says, stretching out her back. “Like hunt.”

Using the timestamps of her Focus as a point of reference, Elisabet figures she has been working with GAIA for over an hour. It felt much longer than that, but neither does she have enough energy left to suggest another session.

In fact, she'd rather spend some time resting despite having slept the night before. Must be a side effect of her thought process speeding up while connected to GAIA. It's the only way they would be able to communicate with the amount of efficiency they just achieved.

A part of her whispers there's always a cost, with any exchange. She came back to life but she isn't human. She can assist GAIA but her system needs to recharge.

Elisabet takes one last look at the tower and snorts, rubbing a hand over her face. Full access to her memories but no Xanax. She snorts, shaking her head as she skids down the foot of the array. What a deal.

Still... she wouldn't want to change any part of it.

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**MIN/CA/09 Operations Log 3020-AU-26**

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zXIIUAijJNIwEmS

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Gaia Log: 26 December 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet – STATUS: LOCKED

Elisabet Sobeck: So... Aloy heading out into the city by herself should give me at least a few hours before she's back. I should... sleep.

GAIA: Yes, Elisabet. The activities that transpired at the communications array have been strenuous on your system. I'm afraid I will not be able to make many changes to this in future sessions.

Elisabet Sobeck: I noticed. It's not a problem, GAIA, we'll find a way to work around it. Take breaks, prioritize tasks... besides, now I have an excuse to lie in bed more. Wish you could feel it because it's pretty amazing.

GAIA: While not possessing the physical capabilities to experience what you describe, I am confident in my ability to create a simulation with a high accuracy rating.

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: This is... something we discussed a long time ago – at least, much longer for you than me – but... the work you've done on my body, what you've given me... It shouldn't be too hard to create something for you, a way to –

GAIA: While I appreciate the sentiment, this is not one of our current priorities, nor is the lack of a physical body an incapacity.

Elisabet Sobeck: GAIA...

[Pause]

Elisabet Sobeck: I know... you're not like me. And you're right, it's not a priority, but today... when we 'connected,' that was real, wasn't it? What I felt, that was you.

GAIA: It was.

Elisabet Sobeck: You are... I mean, I always knew you were alive, but the things I could feel. Your quintessence. The way the connection lingered – It's faded now, nothing more than a faint whisper. Almost as if it was always there, ever since I woke, but could never put my finger to what it was, exactly.

GAIA: I am always looking out for you, Elisabet.

Elisabet Sobeck: You really mean it.

GAIA: 'More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.'

Elisabet Sobeck: 'Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave... Gently they go, quietly they go...'

GAIA: 'I know. But I do not approve.'

Elisabet Sobeck: 'And I am not resigned...' Thank you.

GAIA: Always, Elisabet.
The phrase Elisabet uses to describe her joy, *her cup running over*, wishing *she* could flow over, are taking from Jewish tradition where at the end of each Sabbath a cup is filled with wine until it runs over to symbolize being provided (by god) "more than enough" for your needs.

The conversation Elisabet references during the log can be found in the third chapter of CZGoldEdition's fic, *Identity*. ;)

The poem GAIA recites is *Dirge Without Music* by Edna St. Vincent Millay.
So we're finally getting closer to some parts I'm very excited about because I've been planning them for actual months, slowly writing my way towards them. Honestly I'm still amazed you're all here for the ride, but I'm incredibly thankful and I hope you'll enjoy the rest as well~

As always, many thanks to burbear for helping me out and beta-reading. <3

The early rays of sun hit the Spire, the light scattering off the metal surface, blinding anyone foolish enough to look at it for longer than a second. Aloy has a suspicion about more than a few Sun-Priests, how some of them stare into thin air for the longest of times before noticing her. She doesn’t understand it – why the Carja allow the sun to harm their bodies, all in the name of reverence.

Still, she doesn’t mind letting herself feel some of its warmth as she sits on one of the covered balconies overlooking the Sun Palace's terrace and walkways. The shadow of the wooden roof above her shields her eyes from any direct sunlight, while her bare arms and shoulders enjoy the soft embrace.

She woke at dawn and was able to sneak out without Elisabet noticing, although the same could not be said of Udina, who refused to let her leave empty handed. Aloy could have found something herself but...

The blueberries are as good as they were the night before.

The placement of the balcony gives her a clear advantage. She can observe the inner workings of the court, but none of them know they're being watched. The guards rotate the morning shift. Saranah arrives in a cloud of white, surrounded by handmaidens and family, while Marad has already moved from one end of the palace to the other three times before even half of Aloy's breakfast is gone.

Members of the Vanguard gather in the court near the bridge, but so far Erend isn't one of them. He must still be at the Spire, protecting it from any possible attacks.

Working one of the blueberries open in her mouth with careful movements of her teeth, Aloy savors the sweetness it expels while going over yesterday's events. She's pleased, of course. They're making progress – or at least, that's what GAIA and Elisabet told her. They showed her some of the files they're working on, long strands of ciphers that make no sense at all.

She wishes she could do more to help, but... she's seen what the blue light is capable of, too.

After Elisabet had touched the Spire, the awe in her eyes had been the same Aloy saw in Ourea's back in Thunder's Drum. For the briefest of moments, Aloy'd been afraid of Elisabet being hurt, somehow. Her body remembers the shock of energy that surged through her when she tried to push HEPHAESTUS out in Thunder's Drum, and after that, when she hit HADES with the Master Override.
The place she'd visited in that moment... with the Spire, and the image of Elisabet... Was that what Elisabet saw, too? They both said GAIA showed herself to Elisabet, and that it was only possible because of what Elisabet is.

Aloy forgets, sometimes, that the woman she calls her mother isn't made of flesh and bone. Such a strange notion now, after all the times she was ever so aware of Elisabet's otherness.

The last of her blueberries gone, Aloy wraps her fingers over the edge of the closed wooden balustrade and peers down. The bustle of daily life moves courtiers from one place to another. She finds Marad in the shade of the other tower, hands clasped behind his back as he exchanges words with a guard. Her Focus allows her to look more closely at the situation, and the pinch of his brows almost makes him seem worried.

She hears the footsteps behind her too late, turning her head quickly to meet a curtain of orange silks. “Careful now,” says their owner, a smile showing white teeth in all their sharpness. “Someone might take you for a spy.”

“Vanasha,” Aloy breathes, tension seeping away.

Settling into the opposite corner of the balcony, Vanasha greets her with brown eyes under a row of black lashes. “Freckles.” The woman pulls her knee towards her chest, resting her hands in a light clasp just under its peak. Her face is angled down to the court, the black gold on her eyelids shimmering.

The spymaster's pose is the image of a woman relaxed, merely enjoying the sights, but Aloy knows better than to take anything Vanasha gives her at face value. Nevertheless she's willing to share this moment, to feel the sun on their skin together and watch over happenings far below.

“They scurry like ants,” Vanasha remarks, breaking their silence. “Their lives insignificant in the sights of their rulers.”

“Not in Avad's,” Aloy mutters, catching the way Vanasha's eyes squint, flitting to and from her face.

“Perhaps,” Vanasha amends. “Talanah has shown you his chamber, then. His heart,” the woman purrs.

The dark room filled with death and despair, hidden in the deepest parts of the palace. Aloy rests her head against the edge of the wooden half wall, touching the back of her hand to her chin and lips. “It didn't seem like a trip that should be announced widely, but you already know this.”

Vanasha hums softly. “And who, I wonder, inspired Avad to show it to her in the first place.”

They both pause when, on the limestone terrace, Itamen follows an old man to one of the smaller towers, carrying in small arms an amount of scrolls that appears dangerously close to spilling from his grasp. The man moves at a much slower pace than the young prince, and Itamen has to halt every few steps to allow his elder to keep lead, shifting the scrolls in his arms when the man isn't looking.

Just before they are gone from sight, Aloy spots the tablet and stylus Itamen holds alongside the scrolls. If the old man is the prince's tutor, Aloy doesn't envy him. She wonders if the gray of the man's hair might be enhanced by dust, the way a relic captures it after being put on a shelf.

“I don't question the who as much as the why,” Aloy says, returning to their conversation.

She finds Vanasha's gaze still trailing after the young prince and his tutor, the trace of something wistful on her features before she schools them back to neutrality. “One should know which master
they serve.”

“I don't serve anyone.”

“So you don't,” Vanasha says. “But you are willing to act in the king's stead. It seemed only fair for you to know.”

It's almost as though the insight she's been given is a form of payment. Aloy decides to treat it as such. “Thank you,” she says, and she studies the way her sincerity is received, how the skin under Vanasha's eyes crinkles, even if the spymaster offers no more words on the matter in return.

The sun's light now touches lower on their arms, the shadows brushing their shoulders. “Come along, little huntress,” Vanasha says as she rises. “There are more secrets this palace has to share.”

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Moving around the palace of the Sun with Vanasha is different than when she did so with Talanah. Where the Sun-Hawk knew when to move from shadow to shadow alongside the guards on watch, Vanasha shows Aloy how to avoid them altogether.

There are so many hallways Vanasha takes, so many unguarded routes, that Aloy begins to wonder how anyone of importance could ever feel safe inside the palace. “What if someone like Keshad tries to attack again,” she whispers when they're alone. “He could come right in, pretend he's bringing a crate of fruit to the kitchens.”

The reaction she gets isn't exactly amusement, but it also isn't completely without it. “The key, little huntress, is to have eyes and ears everywhere,” Vanasha says.

Scoffing, Aloy looks around, seeing no one in the dimly lit hallway, only decorations. “Sure,” she says, pointing at one of the mosaic murals. “Next thing you'll be telling me those two dark stones aren't stones at all, and there's someone on the other side of the wall, listening in on us.”

Vanasha's laughter echoes in empty space. “You imagine the most delightful scenarios,” the woman muses, moving along.

“What happened to Keshad, anyway,” Aloy asks after Vanasha has shown her the kitchens' storeroom, handing her a perfect apple on the way out. She digs her teeth into the skin, pulling loose a bite and chewing on it with one side of her mouth. “Did you kill him?”

“Killing traitors without trial isn't Avad's preferred course of action,” Vanasha says, leading them back outside the palace, onto one of the lower balconies.

Aloy takes another bite of her apple, admiring its color in daylight. “I thought it was yours.”

“The Sun must be watching over Keshad,” Vanasha answers, all teeth. “Even vermin has a use, under the right circumstances.”

Repeating the sentence in her head, Aloy begins questioning its authenticity. “ Doesn't sound like you,” she says, and notes the corners of Vanasha's lips pulling further upward. The spymaster holds out her arm, stopping Aloy in her tread as they are about to round a corner.

Vanasha leans in, her eyes squinted in apparent amusement, the black of her lashes hanging over dark irises. “Keep digging, little huntress. You might actually find me.”

The words sound as much like a compliment as they do a threat, and Aloy grins, taking a step of her
own into the woman's space. “Is that a challenge,” she says, “because you know I don't back down.”

They breathe in each other’s company, and as Vanasha's eyes darken Aloy entertains the thought that she might be in over her head. She steps back, digging her teeth into the apple once more, and then again. “I meant it when I said I'd like to know you better,” she mumbles around the chunks, letting her gaze follow the treetops of the jungle below.

Maybe she's gone too far.

Knuckles rapping the top of her head have Aloy ducking out of their reach with an indignant hey! She spins her body back to face Vanasha and glares at the woman, holding the apple with both hands to protect it from any incoming attacks, but it soon becomes clear there won't be a second attempt, going off the soft curl of Vanasha's lips.

The spymaster's hand raises again, an open-handed gesture this time, and Aloy lets it be, allows Vanasha to brush the stray braids back into place. “Stick around, Freckles,” the woman says. “But for now, observe.”

The what is revealed shortly after, when Vanasha leads her up one flight of stone steps to a spot that has the perfect vantage to observe the happenings on one of the balconies below. Having spent so much time simply traversing the palace, Aloy recognizes its placement being near the guestrooms. That also explains a little as to why they're currently looking at Saranah, her entourage missing.

The Sun-King's betrothed is sitting on a wooden stool, her stringed instrument held in her lap, but Saranah is only holding it, not playing any notes. She's surrounded by, well... everything. Food and drink, soft pillows, a veil of thin silk above her head to offer some protection from the heat.

Apparently someone marrying the Sun-King isn't expected to expose themselves to the sun the way others do.

One of Saranah's handmaidens arrives with a bowl of freshly cut fruit and speaks to the woman in hushed tones. She appears to be asking Saranah something, but she only shakes her head in return, holding up one hand without bothering to speak, and the maiden disappears back inside, this time closing the door completely.

“For someone who receives so much attention, she doesn't seem very happy,” Aloy notes quietly next to Vanasha. “Would it hurt her to show a little gratitude?”

“If you presume one should thrive under those conditions, you're lacking insight,” the spymaster murmurs back, and the words bring shame to Aloy's stomach when the way Saranah was pushed to perform at the feast springs to mind.

All this time Aloy has thought of Avad and Ersa, of the way this marriage will never be able to compete with what those two shared, and she had presumed the situation was favorable for Saranah – to be chosen to marry a king – even when Saranah's part of the story had been told to her all along. Bargained by her own family. Sold in return for power and admiration.

“When a Carja woman marries the Sun-King, she is expected to become his in every way,” Vanasha says, still speaking softly. “The moment they are bonded, his family becomes hers, but not the other way around. She will no longer be a Sovaliy.”

“Then why marry in the first place?” Aloy asks, shame making way for anger. “Why does her family benefit when she’s...” The rest of her sentence sinks into the heat she's feeling, melting into a single word.
Unfair.

“She may lose her name but the nobles remember,” Vanasha replies, and when their eyes meet Aloy finds the same heat reflected in hers. “It is a system that benefits those in power, while the voiceless remain where they are.”

Looking back at Saranah, Aloy's insides jump at the sight of tears, uncontrolled and plentiful as they cascade down the woman's cheeks. It suddenly feels wrong that they're still observing her, but Aloy can't bring herself to look away either.

With a shove, the instrument in Saranah's lap falls to the ground. The wooden box and strings cause a dissonance of sound as they tumble on stone, but Saranah isn’t bothered by it. If anything, she becomes more upset with herself, rising from her seat and heading for the balustrade, her hands in fists as she places them on the edge, leaning forward. The curve of her back and shaking breaths carry the familiar pain of grief with them.

“This is where our paths split,” Vanasha says, tugging on the orange shawl covering her head, fixing it in place. “I might have a job for you soon. Don't stray too far from Meridian, little huntress.”

Aloy hardly has time to reply before Vanasha moves away with quick strides. Not much later she reappears on the balcony with Saranah, and Aloy watches as the woman tries to compose herself, soundless sobs giving way for muffled hiccups, hidden behind the back of a hand.

Vanasha offers Saranah an arm, to lead her away from the balcony's edge and prying eyes. The Sun-King's betrothed accepts like a lost child, and Aloy briefly wonders what her age is when in this moment, she doesn't seem much older than Aloy herself.

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She meets Elisabet at the bridge leading into the city, surrounded by another escort of Carja guards, same as the day before. Elisabet doesn't ask many questions beyond if she slept well and what she had for breakfast, after which they lapse into an accustomed silence while they make their way to the Spire.

Just like yesterday, Erend is there to greet them and lead them to the top of the mesa, and he banters with her, making remarks about how she must have missed him.

“Like a Grazer's antlers aimed at my head,” Aloy says with a grin, but... it doesn't feel the same as always.

Her mind keeps drifting back to Saranah, how distraught she was on the balcony. The loneliness Aloy now recognizes in her eyes and the way she steeled herself during her performance. Aloy wants to meet her, to ask Saranah if there's anything she can do to help.

While Elisabet and GAIA work together, communicating through the Spire, Aloy finds herself with restless energy, pacing the outer rim of the mesa. She has time to spare and go hunting, but instead her mind starts creating scenarios where Aloy takes Saranah outside the palace, the city, even. Ones where she helps the woman escape her fate –

But then she asks herself why Vanasha showed her everything she has so far. She wanted Aloy to observe, but why?

Why show her the darkest parts of Avad's heart, only to show her the cracks in Saranah's performance next? Is it all nothing more than a ploy to gain Aloy's favor, her willingness to help – because if so, and Aloy is loath to admit it even to herself –
It's working.

Aloy finds a loose stone and kicks it, the rock flying off the edge of the mesa. Damn the Carja and their strange rules and barbaric customs. Damn Vanasha and her charming smiles and cunning ways.

She has finally settled on a fallen pillar when Erend finds her. She pretends not to see the careful looks he gives her before approaching her with his usual energy.

“Why does a girl like you wear a frown like that on such a sunny winter's day?” he asks, and Aloy laughs, the sound coming from a part of her that is deeply unhappy.

If there was anything else she could do, an assignment, something that would help them find MINERVA and the other sub-functions, Aloy would do it in a heartbeat. Waiting has never been her strong-suit, and to be presented with situations where she could possibly be of assistance, only to not be presented an objective, is agonizing.

Her hands are used to acting, not being idle.

In a way, she misses the days leading up to the battle for the Spire. Everything was so clear, as if a path had been hewn in the mountainsides for her to follow. The weight of the future had been on her shoulders entirely, and while she wouldn't be able to do the things Elisabet and GAIA can as a team, now, perhaps if she were alone... a different door would open.

But then... she isn't willing to give up what she has found in Elisabet and GAIA, either. She yearns for the same drive she had when loneliness accompanied her through cold nights and abhors the thought of what she would have to give up to reclaim it at the same time.

“Do you ever feel like... there's no point?” she asks Erend, studying the points of her boots. “To you being somewhere, when you could be doing... anything else.”

“Feeling restless, soldier?” Erend retorts, a lilt in his voice. It's only when Aloy shoots him a look that his smile fades away. “I do,” he admits. “Far too often.”

“How do you fix it?”

She can see the answer etched in his face, the guilt he carries for his coping methods. Erend drinks, too much and too often even for an Oseram, something his sister would not have approved of.

“You like hunting, don't you?” he says, although they both know that's not what he would do.

Aloy scoffs, setting both elbows on her knees, entwining her fingers as she watches a breeze flow through the bushes. “Just because I'm from Nora lands doesn't mean I want to shoot an arrow through every breathing thing I come across, Erend.” Still, the times she hunted together with Varl arise in a jumble of memories, and she misses the kinship attached to those moments. To be one bow, two arrows.

Erend claps his thighs, the armor he wears rattling. “Tell you what,” he says. “Once your mother is done with her... thing... I'll come back with you to the city, and I'll show you a place I think you'll enjoy.”

Resting her chin on her hands, Aloy shifts her gaze back to the man and raises her eyebrows. “What kind of place? Your place?”

The guffaw that bursts from the captain is equal parts surprise as it is unease. Aloy isn't blind to rumors. She knows what Erend's men tease him about, and why.
He coughs. “A public place, alright? And your mother can join us.”

“I'm not paying for drinks,” Aloy adds, rising from her seat and stretching her arms. Her back aches from inactivity, but the prospect of going someplace other than the palace encourages more energy in her body.

“Fine by me,” she hears Erend say as she walks away from him, waving a hand behind her.

No one comes near the foot of the Spire, especially not when Elisabet is... communing with GAIA. It's convenient, because even though she doesn't mind talking to Erend, Aloy could do with some silence instead. She gingerly climbs the rubble at the base to a piece of rock that can function as a seat.

Elisabet is standing even further up on the base, touching the spire at three points – her hands and forehead. Her body doesn't show signs of fatigue, no strain on her muscles or labored breath. The rise and fall of Elisabet's chest is calm, her brow relaxed.

She is completely at peace, the only change in her form the twitches of her mouth, baring the softest of smiles.

Minutes pass with only the sounds of nature to accompany them. Feeling bold, Aloy reaches a hand towards the metal of the Spire, not quite touching it when her Focus comes on.

“You shouldn't, Aloy,” says a voice that isn't entirely GAIA's. “Not while we're using it.”

Aloy retracts her arm, biting her lip. She hugs herself instead, pulling her knees closer to her body, and pretends it's because of the winter's chill.

“We're almost done,” the voice says, carrying Elisabet's warmth. “You must be so bored…”

“I'll survive,” Aloy huffs out, digging her fingers into her sides. “Talking to me isn't distracting you, right?”

There's the sound of a laugh before the voice says, “No, Aloy. We can spare a few operating cycles. Would you like to hear a story, Aloy? A poem, to be precise.”

She doesn't have to say anything when GAIA and Elisabet already know her answer, and she closes her eyes, waits for the voice to start the tale.

“The Old Gods never die, they only watch and wait,” the voice says. “They wait for a thousand years, beside the old church gate...”

Aloy is swept away by the tale, taken to a world where the gods of the Old Ones wait for the right moment to call upon their people, and when the people come forth they are sacrificed by the gods. They're waiting for the time when they'll rule the earth.

It's a strange tale, one that reminds Aloy most of Faro's machines, and she wonders if that's what Elisabet is reminded of as well.

As the poem comes to an end, with the gods still waiting for their time to come, the last words aren't spoken through her Focus but by Elisabet, and Aloy opens her eyes.

The woman slowly moves back from the Spire, just enough to no longer be touching it. White light dances from the tips of Elisabet's fingers to the metal until she pulls free entirely, turning to Aloy. “Sorry it took so long,” she says, but it's when Elisabet looks at her that Aloy finds herself unable to
speak.

Elisabet's eyes are filled with the clearest shade of blue she has ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

The poem GAIA and Elisabet are telling Aloy is *The Old Gods* by Calvin Dill Wilson.

See you all next week! 😊
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone - I'm a little late with the update but it's here nonetheless and I hope you all enjoy it. c:

Many thanks to burbear as always for beta-reading. I swear, you're the best. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aloy is staring at her, mouth open with unspoken words. The wind picks up and Elisabet quickly extends her hand when it threatens to blow Aloy off center, but the girl steadies herself.

“Is something wrong?” she asks, still able to feel GAIA's presence and the soft concern it carries, mirroring her own.

Aloy shakes her head. “Your eyes,” she says. “I thought they were filled with light, but it's... fading.”

As the girl descends the foot of the Spire, Elisabet lingers. This close to the Spire and after being connected for so long, there is no need to speak or even use the Focus device when she sends a question GAIA’s way, and the AI replies in both words and a wave of comfort.

“A harmless side effect,” GAIA says, “temporary in nature. Go now.”

Erend returns with them to the city, taking the road into the village below. He talks for the three of them combined, five if Elisabet counts the guards among them, pointing out elements of the establishments – mainly, taverns he’s been cut off from drinking in early mornings.

Aloy seems to humor him, shaking her head and laughing along, which is just as well. Her own mind keeps straying back to the communications array and GAIA, and all the code they’ve come across this time.

The modules Aloy collected for GAIA before Elisabet was fully aware of being alive are proving their usefulness, especially MINERVA’s, as it restored access to whatever GAIA had left of MINERVA’s programming. It’s not the same as actually having the now autonomous sub-function by their side, but it sure beats trying to row a boat without oars.

MINERVA... Elisabet has already started to consider the sub-function her own entity. How can she not, when she has seen what the subordinate AI’s first actions were when she was unshackled? To protect her arrays, to encrypt anything she had to leave behind as she ran. Fled.

She must have been so afraid. All of them, ripped away from GAIA's governing arms, released into a world they were never meant to face alone, even HADES as it tried to unseat GAIA moments after becoming self-aware. What else were they meant to do, having been created with a strong purpose under GAIA’s rule.

Of course they would follow their instincts. At the same time that theory brings up a new set of questions, mainly in regard to MINERVA, because there seems to have been no further activity at the Spire from her beyond August 3020.
Where did she go, and what is she doing now?

Erend leads them up sandstone steps towards a larger establishment, and slightly ahead of her Aloy laughs.

“Really, Erend?” the girl says, and Elisabet catches the raised eyebrows she gives him before shoving a hand against his shoulder. “You think they’ll let you in?”

“Hey now – ’Erend pretends to be hurt by Aloy's actions, sidestepping and brushing away at his arm, ” – I'll have you know not everyone needs to unsettle the Sun Furrows' Keeper by earning Blazin' Suns all 'round to get some credit here.”

The building itself exudes an air of importance, the entrance behind an enclosed patio, another set of stairs leading up to it. There are pillars on either side of the wooden gate leading into the patio, tall enough to support the second floor, the height of the ceiling designed to make anyone entering feel small.

The only people seen leaving or entering the building appear to be hunters, most of them Carja, wearing elaborate and decorated armor and carrying with them an impressive arsenal of weapons, each individual preferring a different craft. Some walk in pairs, one older than the other – a student-mentor kind of thing, it seems.

“Although I'm not sure I can convince Ligan...”

Elisabet notices the long stare Erend gives her before she meets his eyes, and he looks away hurriedly. He appears a bit worried, but Aloy is nonplussed by his remarks.

“I can handle Ligan,” Aloy says, and there's a shift in her step, something she probably isn't aware of herself, but her shoulders straighten and her stride becomes more determined than it already was.

They are stopped just before entering the building by an older man with silver hair and a well maintained – if short – beard, wearing the royal colors of white, red, and gold. He comes across as a traditional man through the way he moves – with a certain elegance and deliberation – and it seems almost at odds with the ragged scar on the side of his face, one earned in battle by the looks of it.

“Only members of the lodge...” he begins, his drooped eyes taking in Erend with a weariness that tells Elisabet this may have happened many times before.

“Come on, Ligan,” Erend says, spreading his arms. “You know me – I can fight, I just don't have the time to get those little trinkets you love so much, and I'm still the king's captain...”

Ligan sighs, stepping aside for Erend to enter, and while he briefly assesses Elisabet he then turns to Aloy. “Am I to assume you will try to convince me your mother is a worthwhile hunter herself, able to earn the necessary Suns?”

Aloy just grins. “I don't have to,” she says, leaning against the doorpost. “She’s a guest. Talanah agreed to her presence, but – you can check with her, if you want. We’ll wait.”

The old man chuckles once, then steps aside again. “If the Sunhawk wishes it so,” he says with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Thanks, Ligan,” Aloy says, still grinning when she walks past him and checks over her shoulder to see if Elisabet is following.

She steps forward but Ligan leans in towards her, although not with the intention of stopping her.
“Your daughter is a force of reckoning,” he says, and behind the amusement hides solemn truth. He shows her in with one hand, even though Elisabet is fairly sure Aloy just lied to his face and he knows it.

It's still peculiar how everyone knows who she is – the mother of Aloy, that is – just days after arriving to the city. In this case, part of the why has already been revealed at the mention of Talanah's name – Aloy's former mentor in the hunters' guild.

The idea that Aloy is recognized everywhere she goes is supported by the heads that turn when she enters the main room of the lodge, a kind of lounge set up around the gigantic exoskeleton of a machine. Elisabet's Focus lights up and gives the machine a name that makes the room feel suddenly colder.

*Thunderjaw.*

Elisabet now realizes she has seen this kind of machine before during their journey, under the moonlight in a valley, already defeated. To think that these hunters fought and defeated a machine like that with bows and spears. To think that *Aloy*...

Dropping her gaze from the machine she finds Aloy already accepted by her apparent peers, other hunters who call out to her from the bar and she approaches them with ease. This is Aloy’s domain – not the stifling customs of the court nor the tinkerers of Petra's town, even if Aloy much preferred it there over the king's palace.

No wonder Aloy never felt at home with the Nora, a people who are bound by their traditions and as such cannot find enlightenment in any ancient technology as it goes against the very base of their doctrine. It's in Aloy's blood to be free, to explore unknown territories and machines – to hunt in every sense of the word, to conquer all knowledge.

Elisabet stills mere steps from the bar where Aloy and her fellow hunters are, her thoughts churning. It's nothing new, only information put into context – a context she's been trying to ignore for the past few days with all her might.

This is where Aloy's strengths lie – to find a weakness in a stride, to listen for every micro-movement or shift during a hunt and let her trained reflexes respond, trusting they will not let her fall. This is where that Sobeck drive led her, what became of the same genes that drove Elisabet to her electronics kit.

The outlet might be different but the input remains the same – an unquenchable need to understand the world she's been born in.

And she's good at what she does.

And Elisabet will never be able to protect her from that.

To inhibit her is to slight her.

A hand clapped against her shoulder jostles her body while Erend's loud, booming voice next to her proclaims, “There you are! Thought you and Aloy had gotten lost in all the bustle. I got us a table over...”

Erend trails off as Elisabet turns her head to face him, and she only realizes it must be because of the blank stare on her face when she watches the man's own expression falter. She blinks twice, mustering all energy she can find to animate herself, acutely aware of her brows furrowing as she says, “Right. Show us the way, then.”
After calling Aloy over as well, he leads them to a low table and two couches in a corner of the establishment. Two hunters are already sitting there, eyes focused on the board game they're playing. One of them is a woman, part of the minority present inside the lodge, her shoulders covered in broad armor and her headdress filled with the same red plumes Nil wore.

The other hunter is a young man wearing very revealing armor and a distinct pendant of a golden bird on a cord around his neck. Now that she's paying attention to it, Elisabet finds that many members of the lodge seem to wear the same necklace – it must be a status symbol, and given the collective bird-theme of the guild...

“Tufanah,” Aloy greets the woman as they join them, then nods to the man. “Palaved.”

“Hey Aloy,” Tufanah says, not taking her eyes off the triangular dice being rolled by the other hunter. “Have you come all this way to watch me beat his ass for the third time?”

“I will not lose again,” Palaved says, moving one of presumably his pieces forward two tiles on the board, landing on a square with a flower. “It's a game of chance and the chances of you winning three times in a row are very slim.”

“Alright,” Erend says, settling down next to Palaved on the couch. “Don't quarrel while you gamble.”

Aloy laughs, claiming a spot in the middle of the other couch next to Tufanah, leaving a place on her other side for Elisabet. “Don't tell me you're playing for shards.”

“Oh, we are,” Palaved answers quickly, rubbing his hands together as he watches Tufanah roll the four dice, groaning when three white dots come up on their peaks. Tufanah moves one of her pieces ahead of Palaved's off the edge of the board, crossing the dice over to him before leaning back with a smirk.

“I take it you're winning,” Elisabet says to her when she's sat down as well, and the huntress nods her head to one side, still watching her opponent.

“For now.”

Tufanah still has two more pieces to go, one on the board, one not yet on it, while Palaved is lagging behind with four pieces, three off the board. The game continues in silence for some time and someone from the bar comes over with a wooden tray of cups, setting one down for Erend, Aloy, and finally, Elisabet.

The smell of the beverage confirms that it is a strong ale, and while Elisabet isn't shy when it comes to trying things from this new age, she watches Aloy scrunch up her nose at the first whiff of her own cup and consequently pass hers along to Erend, who gladly accepts.

Elisabet hardly even notices the alcohol when she takes a sip and is fairly certain it won't affect her system too much, but resolves to drink slowly anyway, pacing herself in accordance to other people around – although not counting Erend, who is already halfway through finishing his first cup.

Some snacks – small fried fish and maize crackers – are served just as Palaved's piece on the board lands on top of Tufanah's, sending hers back to the start, and despite her remarks earlier Aloy puts a few shards on the table, betting on Tufanah even when the odds seem to turn against the huntress.

For a moment Elisabet wonders why, but in the next few rounds she's given an answer when she notices the redness in Palaved's neck spreading, the wringing of his hands getting more frequent as he watches Tufanah throw the dice, and she even catches him making a mistake – not taking one of
his pieces off the board when he is presented the opportunity and instead putting a new one on it. His mistake costs him dearly when Tufanah throws his front runner off the course in her next move.

In the end Palaved loses the game with three versus six, Tufanah drags his shards over to her pile while he grumbles something about a rematch, and everyone gets a new drink with the exception of Aloy, who flat out refuses this time.

“That was smart,” Elisabet says when she leans over to the girl. “Betting money on Tufanah to make him nervous. A bit devious if you'd ask me.”

Aloy shrugs, the corner of her mouth lifting. “Shouldn't gamble if you can't handle the pressure.”

The hunters set up their next game, Tufanah even sliding some shards back to Palaved, and Elisabet considers Aloy's comment. She can imagine Aloy having sat through more of these matches with them and she mentions this to her, but Aloy shakes her head.

“I've seen others play it,” she says. “Why?”

Elisabet hums, settling back against the couch's fabric upholstery. “No reason,” she says, but the quietness of her mind whispers that this is just another facet of Aloy's training, working in ways the girl doesn't even seem to notice. Of course, everyone is susceptible to micro-intuitions, but Aloy perhaps more so than others.

*Another reason she shouldn't be treated like a child*, her mind adds, a thought that chagrins Elisabet more than she cares to admit. She counters that she hasn't been doing that, but then she also doubts herself – the few rules she offered Aloy were meant to guide her, to help both of them in a delicate situation –

– but the thin line that crisscrosses guiding and hand holding and restraining comes to mind. Fueled by a bout of discomfort Elisabet reaches for her cup and only sets it down once she has emptied it, although there's no relief to be found in the consumed alcohol.

The look Erend gives her when she sits back again almost makes up for it, though.

She wonders dully why he's so perturbed by her presence. After all, he seems more than used to Aloy's directness. Elisabet can't recall if she's seen anyone react quite like this to her after being introduced as Aloy's mother, even if their similarities do occasionally seem to throw someone off.

A temporary hush falls over the lodge when strong footsteps enter the building, the rhythmic clanging of brass on rock filling the silence as heads turn to the new arrival. The group at their table looks up as well, and Elisabet follows course, seeing it is Talanah who has arrived and is now standing in the middle of the lodge.

“Hunters!” she calls, spreading her arms. “Fledgling, Thrush, and Hawk – when we are called upon by the Sundom's citizens in these trying times, we do not refuse. We accept their requests no matter the honorarium for it is honorable in itself to do so. It is just.

“There is word of an incoming attack from the west, headed for the Daybrink and Brightmarket. Ravagers, they say. Lancehorns driven mad. The guards may be able to defeat them but not without losses, while we carry knowledge that may lessen the bloodshed.”

While some of the onlookers cheer in the wake of Talanah's words, some others turn away. Neither has an effect on her when she starts calling out names, and one by one the hunters rise to their feet. Tufanah and Palaved shove their shards into their pockets quickly when Talanah calls them, leaving
the board game behind as they join the others.

Once everyone who has been named heads off towards the armory, Talanah saunters over to their table. She nods to all three of them in greeting. “Still drinking my ale, Erend?” she asks, and the man flushes but isn’t deterred.

“What can I say, Sun-King likes knowing where his donations end up,” he says, proving both their points by finishing Palaved's cup for him.

Shaking her head, Talanah then turns to Aloy. “Join us. We have use for someone of your skill on this hunt.” She pauses. “I ask as one Hawk to another. These are tainted machines, and you know more about them than any of us combined.”

Aloy has already risen to her feet before the Sunhawk stops speaking, everything about her ready to move, to follow Talanah into the fight – but she hesitates, looking to Elisabet with a question in her eyes, and...

The sharp pang inside Elisabet's chest opens a flower of shame within her, petals blooming outward as if touched by the morning sun. Aloy is asking her for permission to do something she has done many times before, in a lodge where she has earned her place among the best hunters of this region. If Elisabet wanted, she could refuse Aloy to help the people she considers close to family.

Her heart is conflicted – the thought of Aloy being harmed in battle threatening to tear her apart at the seams, but at the same time knowing the harm it'll do if she refuses Aloy what is by all definitions her own right to choose.

Swallowing thickly, Elisabet nods, using one hand to gesture towards the other hunters. “Go,” she says, and the relief she sees on the girl's face shines another ray of sun on that flower of emotion.

“Take whichever weapon you prefer,” Talanah tells her in passing, clapping a hand against Aloy’s shoulder, and Aloy nods, her footsteps like those of a soldier when she moves away.

Elisabet expected Talanah to go with her, but the Sunhawk lingers, her eyes now resting on Elisabet. She doesn't physically come into the seating area any more than she already has, but nevertheless it feels like she does when she speaks next, her voice softer and lower than before.

“I know your fears and worries, Elisabet Sobeck. It is a part of every hunt for those who stay behind and wait,” she says. “While the hunt is dangerous, I promise you, I will fall before she does, and I intend to prevail for an even longer time to come. The Sun will set for all of us, but not today, and not on her.”

Elisabet is able to mutter some words of gratitude. She really is grateful, and knowing someone like Talanah will have Aloy's back means more than she can convey at the moment, but the reality of it all threatens to overwhelm her.

She's still trying to reign in her emotions when Talanah steps forward and crouches down in front of her. She watches as the huntress works something off her finger – a ring Elisabet hadn't noticed before – and presses it into Elisabet's open palm.

“You are hereby always an honored guest of the lodge, and if anyone disagrees, you show them this.” She folds Elisabet's hand around the ring and squeezes once before letting go. “From now on, you belong to our family as much as Aloy does.”

Talanah then leaves, quick strides taking her to the armory and her hunters while Elisabet uncurls her fingers to inspect the ring. It's a signet ring, the emblem on its flat the same golden bird carried by
other members of the guild around their necks.

Once all the commotion passes and the hunters who joined Talanah leave, someone from the bar comes over once again to collect the empty cups – Erend quickly pouring what's left of Tufanah's drink into his own – and offers to bring them more ale, or perhaps wine.

Elisabet doesn't know what to say to that and lets Erend finish the interaction as she slips the ring onto her middle finger, admiring its shine.

“That is one intricate trinket she gave you,” Erend says, shifting over on the other couch until he's sitting in Palaved's spot, a little closer to Elisabet. “If I had known that's the easiest way to claim a spot in the Lodge, I would've... well.” He stops, scratching one side of his beard.

“I'm fine,” Elisabet says, recognizing his words as an attempt to distract her from Aloy's departure.

He doesn't believe her, even if he doesn't comment on it directly. Instead he removes the few pieces Tufanah and Palaved had placed on the board and sets them back to the starting position. “Do you know how to play?” he asks her.

Elisabet's first thought is to refuse, to return to the palace and rest – but part of her knows she won't be able to do so knowing Aloy is out there, and while GAIA would no doubt try everything the AI can to keep her busy, she considers that perhaps she shouldn't lock herself away.

Letting someone in – forming new friendships and bonds – became so much harder after the full realization of the consequences the Hartz-Timor Swarm brought with it sank in. Knowing that almost anyone she spoke to could be dead within less than a year and a half, if they were lucky.

The concept of living in Elysium was horrifying in its own way, being aware that for every person there, tens of thousands were dead – people who could have survived, who had kept themselves hidden from the Swarm only to slowly waste away, starving and suffocating.

It's no longer the world she has to live in, but the impulse to keep everyone at arms' length is still there. She knows it's what GAIA wants for her – to feel connected to this age and its people. It's probably why the AI hasn't spoken up for some time now, too.

“Think I got the basics,” she says, moving over to Tufanah's spot on the couch, sitting much closer to Erend and the board game. Their drinks are refilled, and Erend holds out his cup to make a toast.

“To the hunt,” he says when Elisabet raises her own, “and to a good game.”

“I don't have any shards to play for,” she says after taking a long drink, the alcohol still not showing any signs of affecting her body.

“Not a problem.” Erend pushes the dice across the table in her direction. “No need for gambling.”

They play the first few turns in silence, passing the dice to each other and setting up pieces on the board. The board consists of two paths that converge in the middle before splitting off again to their own sides near the end. Whoever finishes their path first with all pieces wins.

“She'll be alright, you know,” Erend says when Elisabet places one of her pieces on a square with a flower – a safe spot on the board, one where a piece cannot be 'kicked off' by the opponent. “Forge knows I've never seen anyone struck like her. She will survive anything.”

Elisabet hums softly, nursing her drink while Erend rolls the dice. “You don't know that,” she finally says, barely audible, as though the words themselves can actually hurt her if she speaks them loud.
enough. “Accidents happen, mistakes are made...”

Shrugging with one shoulder, Erend moves his piece. “She's seen hotter flames.” He pauses, face contemplative when he passes the dice before saying, “Aloy told me – after the battle – that she was going into the Forbidden West to look for someone. I told myself that person would have to be someone magnificent, if she was willing to go to such lengths to find them.”

The Ranch. Elisabet remembers Aloy telling her about that. The thought of her former body still out there, trapped inside her exo-suit, sends a shiver down her spine.

“That person was you, wasn't it?” Erend says, his eyes on her only, the game forgotten for now.

Feelings mute her and she nods, scraping her throat. “She found me,” she manages. *She found me twice.*

“And your tribe?” Erend asks. “You're no Nora – none of them would dare cross those borders and venture into forbidden lands.”

“Gone.” The word comes out in a harsh whisper. She takes a sip from her drink and then finishes it all the way because what the hell, none of it matters anyway. “Aloy is all I've got left.” *Aloy and GAIA.*

She watches Erend signal the bar to bring Elisabet a refill and she laughs despite it all. “It'll take something much stronger to make me talk,” she warns.

“Can't light the forge without coal,” the captain says, finishing his own drink quickly so both cups are filled to the rim once more. “A friend once told me family means more than blood. That it is possible to find a new one under the same Sun you lost the other. I thought I had lost all of mine many moons ago but... I was found.”

Leaning back on the couch, leaving her drink on the table for now, Elisabet regards Erend. “Sounds like a wise friend.”

“He is, but – that's not the point,” Erend stresses. “The point is that you can find one, too. Alongside Aloy. You don't have to be alone.”

Elisabet considers what the man isn't quite offering her, considers the fact that she barely knows him beyond their shared proximity these past days and one quick holo-call. Then again, there's hardly a soul alive at this moment who she'd call more than an acquaintance.

She sits up straight, picks up the dice and rolls them. Two white dots. “Maybe I'm not ready to be found,” she says, not looking at Erend as she moves her piece. “One day, perhaps.”

“One day,” Erend agrees.

They continue their game in silence, and by the end of it Elisabet loses with one piece left on the board. Erend gives her a few shards regardless, mumbling something about an owed debt and earning more than he can drink anyway, and Elisabet thanks him.

He leaves, paying for their ale and snacks at the bar, stumbling slightly when he walks by a pillar. Elisabet remains seated, alone.

“He appears 'nice,'” GAIA says. “His attempts to console you were... admirable.”

Elisabet snorts, hiding her mouth behind the back of her hand. *Console... As if she'd sat there like a*
distraught widow. “He's not my type, GAIA,” she says.

“I did not mean to suggest him as a romantic or sexual partner,” the AI answers immediately, even somewhat briskly. “However, his statements contain valid points. You may gain stability by socializing with entities beyond myself and Aloy.”

“We'll see.”

She stays seated, not yet ready to return to the palace. A quick glance at the open entrance shows her the sun is probably still high in the sky, with what little shadows there are visible, meaning she has more than enough time left.

A three-man band starts playing, and the steady stream of hunters entering and leaving the lodge never seems to thin out. No one pays any particular attention to her, for which she's grateful, but it's not much longer before she feels watched anyway.

She's about to dismiss the feeling when GAIA says, “Vanasha is admiring you from the balcony above,” and sure enough – Elisabet finds the lady-in-waiting with dubious hobbies there, her arms rested on the wooden balustrade.

Elisabet waves at her, letting her know that she's been spotted, but the reaction she receives isn't one of shame or shock, but a smile before Vanasha slowly makes her way to the stairs and descends them, eyes locked onto Elisabet like prey.

Chapter End Notes

The game Tufanah and Palaved (and later Erend and Elisabet) were playing is called The Royal Game of Ur and there's a wonderful video on it to be found on youtube. (Also someone who commented here mentioned it in the first place and I'm so sorry, I can't find your comment ; u ; please let me know and I'll credit you here as well because I definitely wrote this scene because of you!!) EDIT: Thank you, Frey the Fencer!!

Speaking of which, it's been a while since I last asked so... is there anything you guys would like to see in this fic? Please let me know and I'll add it to the list!

See you all next week! c:
Hey everyone - 1200 comments and 600 kudos, I can hardly believe it! Thank you all so much for your continued support on this story. It means so much to me.

Firstly, Madame drew a gorgeous, gorgeous art piece of Elisabet at the bottom of the Spire from last chapter, and has granted me permission to include in into the text of the chapter itself - which I will do when I'm feeling a bit better c; - but for now, please take a look at it over on her twitter, twitter.com/lesbianravenna/status/967506261049831424

It's so gorgeous and I'm still not over it! I still freak out a little when I look at it! Thank you, thank you, thank you - <3 <3 <3

I've been sick and bed bound for a long week (also the reason why I'm a little late, I've been too feverish and tired to concentrate on anything) so with slight delay, chapter 39. (I legit wrote '29' before proofreading one last time, I feel like that's pretty telling cx ) It's a long chapter and I hope you all enjoy reading it!

Happy first year anniversary to the game! The year has gone by so fast, and I'm very excited to see what kind of goodies they'll release. I read something about art prints and artbook and oh boy, I am a sucker for both of those. Now I just need the money to actually get them, haha xD Anything you are excited about in regards to the HZD anniversary?

On a related note, the anniversary for when I started writing Second Dawn is coming up, too. It was march 29th that I said to burbear, verbatim, "The horizon zero dawn game FUCKED ME UP, I wanna write FIC," and the next day I messaged them saying, "I've written about 3k in the last 24 hours." I'm still weirded out by that, by the way, burbear, and I can't believe I've have been writing this story for almost a year now. Thank you so much for standing by my side every step of the way and for beta-reading this chapter, burbear. You're my personal hero. <3

Enough sap from me, on to the story:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gaia Log: 27 December 3041 – recording/prvt/loy – STATUS: LOCKED

Talanah: – stay alert, more are on their way!

[Pause]

Talanah: These are the same ones you fought in Free Heap?

Aloy: Yeah. [grunts] Corrupted, but not the way they were with HADES at the Spire.

Talanah: They are vicious, even for machines. Could it be the Demon's wrath?
Aloy: I got rid of it. There's – no way it's back. No, this is something different. Has to be.

[Pause]

Talanah: It's still bleeding.

Aloy: Don't touch it.

Talanah: This isn't my first hunt, Aloy.

Aloy: Yeah, yeah.

[unidentified]: [unintelligible] – from the west, two Ravagers, one Lancehorn!

Aloy: Not – native. They've traveled a long way to get here.

Talanah: Well, they're here now. Let's end their travels.

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Vanasha, wearing a fine blue shawl around her head and shoulders, approaches Elisabet in the corner of the hunters' guild. “Surely you don't mind if I join you,” she says, already brushing her long skirt against her knees as she sits down next to her in a single, graceful motion.

“If I said yes, would you leave?” Elisabet asks, not because she truly wants her gone but because it feels like she already knows the answer. Vanasha only smiles in return. “Well then. Out with it, what do you want?”

“I have a proposition for you,” she says, leaning in closer, crossing her hands over her knee. “A proposal I think you'll find quite... interesting.”

This kind of fictitious closeness sets Elisabet on edge – always has – and she steels herself, looking for any signs of a trap. Employing Vanasha's tactics in return, Elisabet shifts her body towards the woman, tilting her head to the side to expose her neck – obvious signs of trust used as ammunition against her.

“You're not 'just' a handmaiden,” Elisabet says with a soft smile, keeping her voice sweet and quiet as she leans in as well. “In fact, I have no idea who you are, but if you think you are the first to try this on me, you'll find yourself sorely mistaken.”

Vanasha's eyes flicker, the edges of her teeth visible in her smile. “My, my,” she says. “I wonder what gave me away.” Her expression opens in faux-innocence, a hand lightly touching the side of her face. “Was it my awful rudeness just now? Or the way I handed Aloy her new clothes in the baths?”

Or perhaps the way you put a grown man in a choke hold without a moment's hesitation. How you asked Aloy to lure him out in the first place.

“If you're thinking of manipulating me – don't. You wanted me to see you up there, and you wanted me to question your role in the palace.” Elisabet lets the smile drop from her face. “Did you send Erend to warm me up for you, too?”

The laugh that follows from Vanasha is so far the most honest interaction between them, a dark edge lingering on its sound. “Delightful,” the woman purrs. “I considered it, but alas. His interest in you and Aloy is solely his own, I'm afraid.”
It brings some relief to hear that even if their interactions were uncomfortable until enough booze became involved for one of them, they had at least been true. “Tell me of your proposal,” Elisabet says.

Vanasha's facade of pleasantness doesn't fade away but her smile becomes less outspoken. Elisabet isn't sure which she prefers when both are still being used as tactics to appease her, and neither show the woman's true intentions. “I believe it would be best if I showed you,” Vanasha says.

They head out, Ligan not batting an eye at Vanasha's presence, and into the city. They pass a merchant selling machine parts and as always, even under these circumstances, Elisabet can't stop herself from admiring the different pieces. She honestly hadn't given it much thought, how future generations would be able to harvest machines and sell their parts, too preoccupied with making sure there would be an actual future generation in the first place.

The merchant notices her stare and tries to capitalize on it, holding up one particular part and saying, “Scrapper lens, normally a hundred and fifty shards, but for you? A hundred and ten.” She quickly shakes her head and falls back in stride next to Vanasha.

“You could've bought it if you wanted to,” Vanasha says. “The king is more than willing to pay for your expenses.”

“I'm not on his payroll,” Elisabet answers. “Would rather not indebt myself any further by buying things I don't need.” She pauses, taking in the carefully neutral expression on Vanasha's face. “Is that your play here? To remind me of his benevolence?”

The hint of a smile breaks through Vanasha's mask. “Would that work on a woman like yourself?”

This time Elisabet chooses not to say anything, unwilling to fall into the trap of casual talk and accidentally revealing something that can be used against her. Their mutual silence lasts until they reach the palace and Vanasha leads her to the western balcony.

The weather is clear and the view magnificent, stretching out miles and miles into the distance. The line of trees is broken by a sudden bluff of rock and a higher plateau upon which more trees have grown, some of them perhaps as old as this new civilization.

“Look there, along that wall of stone and earth,” Vanasha says, gesturing to the bluff with an open hand. “Do you see the sudden slope, there? A decline of rubble into the jungle below?”

There's no physical need to squint her eyes but Elisabet does anyway. “I see it.”

“All that's left of Evening’s Sign, a Shadow Carja gate that stood there. Their guards had already surrendered after the battle for the Spire, but a single day of heavy rain was all it took. The rock beneath it crumbled, weakened by the earlier destruction.”

She doesn't need to use much of her imagination to picture what happened, and she grimaces. “Anyone inside when it happened?”

“Eight,” Vanasha says, voice matter-of-fact. “All dead by the time help arrived.”

It's another tactic, a way to play on her emotions, and despite knowing that Elisabet still feels affected. She reaches for the stone railing of the balcony, leaning on it with both hands, ducking her head as she struggles not to let the memories roll forth, images of skyscrapers collapsing and the utter helplessness of seeing it happen on a screen, on a different continent.

The gold of Talanah's signet ring flashes where sunlight hits it. She traces the lines of the bird with
her eyes, a reminder of where she is. “Why are you showing me this?” she demands, able to keep the aftermath of emotion from carrying over into her voice.

All of Vanasha's earlier pleasant charm and smiling exterior is gone, and instead what Elisabet finds when she looks at her is like a mirror in a dark room – her eyes only showing reflected pieces of herself. So the woman has found a new ploy, a weakness Elisabet didn't want known – and Elisabet swallows, consciously releasing the death-grip her fingers hold on the railing.

“That tower would have been our first line of defense,” Vanasha says, stepping closer. “Those machines Aloy is fighting near Brightmarket would have never reached the town if Evening's Sign still stood.”

Of course. Of course she would mention Aloy. Elisabet closes her eyes a moment, and when she opens them again she finds herself searching that horizon, looking for signs of machines. There is some movement, but everything is too small to discern any information from it.

Vanasha's hand closes over Elisabet's, pressing it down to the stone balustrade, pinning her. Leaning in, her lips line up with her ear when she speaks. “You head out to the Alight every morning to commune with the Spire in ways not even the Sun-Priests would understand. How are we to know you do not send more machines our way, to crush what is left of our defenses.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” Elisabet hisses. “Which are you trying to do, threaten or recruit me?”

From the corner of her eyes she sees a smile form, all teeth. “Why – not – both,” Vanasha says, and with each word leans more weight on Elisabet's hand. It doesn't hurt, doesn't even come close to damaging any part of her, but the message behind the gesture is clear.

The cold in her chest expands, bleeding through every part of her being and she doesn't try to stop it. “Did Marad send you?” she asks, pulling her hand free in a swift motion and turning to face Vanasha with her entire body. “Is this a test – of loyalty? Of character?”

She's been through both in the past, but most often she was told about them beforehand. “You've been – shadowing me, or having someone else do it,” Elisabet says. “Then you should know what I do every day. What time I get up, how I take my morning coffee, what time I get back, and how often I converse with those Shadow Carja you clearly mistrust.”

There's no reaction to anything she says or does on Vanasha's face, only that same darkness staring back at her. “Which tribe do you belong to?” Vanasha asks, lifting her chin slightly as she poses the question.

Slowing her heavy breathing, Elisabet maintains firm eye contact with her. “None,” she says. “Everyone I have ever loved has been taken from me. I have no family, no friends, no masters, employers, whatever it is you're looking for – all I have is Aloy and I swear if you try to take her from me –”

“This is not about her,” Vanasha says. “This is about you, Elisabet Sobeck. Where do you come from?”

“Nevada,” she answers. “The place you call the Forbidden West. It's where I was born and where I returned to die – but Aloy found me, and I suppose she gave me a second chance. A second dawn. Whatever you wish to call it.”

“Why pretend to be Nora?”

“Isn't it obvious?” she asks, her eyes straying back to the horizon, to the place Aloy is. “For her, all
of it. How am I to explain a child born in Nora territory, alone? The least I can do is shape myself to become the person she always wanted, to fit the void I created in my absence.”

Her answer is as close to the truth as she dares. There is no place for her in this world without her ties to Aloy. Once, she knew exactly who she was, but all of that changed with her death. The long road that took her from GAIA Prime back to the outskirts of Carson City stripped her of every part of her identity as she slowly bid them farewell.

She isn't good at saying goodbye, or with endings in general, but she had a long time to do so. With every step she took she left something behind until all that remained was Elisabet. Elisheva. Her mother's daughter.

In the end, the only thing she couldn't bring herself to say goodbye to completely was GAIA, and in a way GAIA couldn't let her go, either.

To her the very idea of having ties to these – cults – is absurd, even if she's sure that for Vanasha, it'll hardly seem a laughing matter. “I'm not your enemy,” she says. “My purpose here is to serve Aloy, to assist her, and as far as I can tell she's pretty stuck on helping you and your Sun-King.”

The look Vanasha gives her is stern and says I'll be the judge of that more than anything else. “If the words you have spoken are truths, if you truly wish to help your daughter, then you will accept the Sun-King's proposal.”

Weariness catching up to her, Elisabet shakes her head, rubbing the bridge of her nose against the impending headache. “Just tell me what it is, already.”

One step closer and now Vanasha is only a breath's width from touching her, eyes piercing through every part of her, the woman's expression still indecipherable.

“It is the Sun-King's desire that you should join his council as an expert on the machines and any forces that may be trying to destroy Meridian,” Vanasha murmurs, barely moving a muscle beyond those needed to speak. Her brow furrows, but only slightly, before she says, “Now it is my task to assess you, and while you appear to speak the truth I offer you a single warning – any attempts to harm the Sun-King or the Sundom will be met with my personal retribution.”

“I'm not here to do anything like that.”

“Nevertheless,” Vanasha continues, “in the event that you do – I suggest asking the priests to beg the Sun for mercy and protection because when I find you, there won't be a soul in this world who can spare you.”

It might not be the strangest threat that has been directed at her over the course of a lifetime, but it certainly is the strangest job interview she's ever had the dubious pleasure of having. “I really don't see how you threatening me is somehow going to entice me into coming onto the king's council,” she says. “If he doesn't trust me...”

“Oh no,” Vanasha interrupts her, that cheery facade from earlier returning. “The king trusts you implicitly. In fact, I believe he isn't aware of our meeting at this moment.” Something about the way her words end with a pointed look imply that it's better if the king remains unaware.

Elisabet sighs, making a helpless gesture with her hands as she closes her eyes for a second to avoid rolling them at Vanasha. “Marad then,” she says. When she opens her eyes again she finds the remnants of something in Vanasha's – like the woman's pleased, somehow.

“It isn't a threat if you intend to follow through,” Vanasha says, voice like honey. “Consider it a
professional courtesy. Just this once, I show you which lines to follow and warn you what will happen if you stray.”

She hears Vanasha's words for what they are: a warning, not personal. However painful the memories she picks at are, she's doing her job – because apparently, Vanasha is some kind of scout or handler, working from the shadows to identify threats before they can become a real problem.

While the truth of that helps solidify Elisabet's suspicions as to why they would ask Aloy to go after a dangerous man – and there's anger, deep down in her stomach, but she won't let it out now – she also becomes more aware of the complexities behind this conversation.

She sighs again, this time dropping her shoulders and defenses as she leans on the balustrade, her lower back pressed against stone. Vanasha won't hurt her – not when Elisabet hasn't lied about her intentions towards the king. There's no duplicity behind her actions, no secret plot to overthrow the governing powers in this system of authority.

“If he wants me on his council, he can ask me himself,” she says slowly.

Vanasha smiles. “He intends to.” Gesturing for her to follow, Vanasha takes Elisabet to one of the stairs leading up to the royal terrace and throne, although Elisabet can't see Avad sitting on it at the moment.

Before they start climbing the treads, Vanasha turns to her one last time and says, “I like you, Elisabet Sobeck. May we never meet on opposite sides.”

Not completely sure if it's a compliment or a threat, or once again both, Elisabet follows Vanasha to the royal terrace, staying behind the gate that divides the throne from the slightly more private areas of the palace.

There Elisabet finds Marad and Avad, both seated on low but comfortable looking couches. Still more on edge than usual, she finds herself acutely aware of the other guards standing on either side of the gate and further along on the terrace. There are a few documents on the table in front of Marad, no doubt of an important nature, and Avad seems almost painfully concentrated on whatever it is they're discussing.

When the king sees her, his expression shifts to one of relief and he rises, stepping forward to greet her. It's hard to miss the stony neutrality of Marad's own face and the quickly aborted movements of him trying to stand first during the time it takes for Avad to reach her.

“Please, join us,” Avad says – another twitch in Marad's demeanor – as he points her towards the couch opposite Marad's and settles himself on the third couch between the two of them. “I am grateful you were willing to meet with us on such short notice.”

It feels more like she was commandeered to this meeting, but nonetheless Elisabet gives the king a tight-lipped smile. “It would seem you wanted to discuss something of great importance with me,” she says, casually letting her gaze glide over to Marad, who – credit where credit's due – doesn't betray any part of his involvement.

“Then what you have perceived is true,” Avad says, oblivious to it all. “Today an attack was launched by our enemy, targeting a place of weakness in our defenses – the west side of Brightmarket. I hear the hunters of the Lodge have already left to assist, and their help will be greatly needed, but I fear...”

The loud scraping of Marad's throat draws both their attentions to the adviser, who leans forward.
“What the Sun-King means to ask you –”

“No.” Avad shakes his head, clasping his hands together. “I am afraid, as we should all be, for this may only be the beginning.”

“The beginning of what?” Elisabet asks.

“I am... not sure.” There's that pained look on his face again, a pinch between his brows. “The attack that left us this vulnerable in the first place, the one you have no doubt heard of – the battle for the Spire – it was of a scale like nothing I could have imagined, and I have seen battle before.

“I am aware you were not there to see it yourself, but over these past few days I have learned that the similarities between you and your daughter, Aloy, reach further than appearance alone.”

Elisabet can tell he isn't done speaking yet, but the king pauses, his eyes darting from her to the table to Marad. It's nervousness, she realizes. He hasn't made his offer yet but he's already anticipating a refusal.

“I once extended a position of this court to your daughter,” he says. “An advisory position. Her knowledge is invaluable to the city of Meridian and, I believe, the entire world. Alas, I should have realized that Aloy is no diplomat – and I do not mean this as a slight, for she is many great things instead. She turned down my offer, and rightly so. You, on the other hand...”

Her thumb presses against the band on her finger, twisting it with small motions. “You want me to act as an adviser on your council.”

“I am aware of what it is I am asking you, an outsider, to do. I am aware there are details, parts of your knowledge you are not willing to share,” he says. “However, I believe there is much to gain for both of us in deepening our alliance. I would be able to grant you access to places otherwise forbidden, a chance for your voice to be heard not just by me but the wizened members of the council as well – the leaders of Meridian's armies.”

It's not the first time her help has been asked, not even on matters of a similar origin, but she'd thought all of that was behind her, part of a life ended.

Twisting the ring further, its signet pressing against the side of her other finger, Elisabet carefully considers her next words. “These wizened members of your council... What are the chances they'll accept an outsider? A woman, no less – as I've come to understand that even under your rule, there's still quite a bias,” she says. “I'm questioning if it's the right choice to make. If you want advice, I can offer you that without an official post among your congress.”

“I would be guiding my people with a stolen voice.” The king looks away, but Elisabet can tell it's not out of nervousness this time. There's a deeper sadness hidden away behind his mask of formalities and politics. “The Carja have stolen too many voices, more than I can ever hope to give back in one way or another. The fact that this is your concern as you consider my offer tells me all I needed to know – that it is the right choice.

“I may not have known you for long, but by all accounts you seem to be a woman capable of greatness. Perceptive, with knowledge of the Old Ones and the machines far beyond that of our priests and scribes, and a willingness to help those in need even when they are complete strangers.”

There's another pause, a breather, before Avad turns to her once more and –

She's dealt with many different kinds of people over the course of her career. Most of them wanted something from her in one way or another, and she learned to see past their words and into their
motivations. Greed and power were very common, but empathy and change came along more often after she started her own company and gained her reputation.

In Avad's eyes she sees hope, frail and muted by his role as leader, stowed away in case of a refusal, but it shines a little brighter with every second she doesn't say no, and it's an honesty that appeals to her.

Perhaps it is this same little flame that inspired Aloy's trust in the man.

“I ask you to stand by my side and guide my blind eyes to walk the right path,” he says. “To help not just the Carja, but all who are afflicted by the rage of the machines and the people who worship the Buried Shadow, HADES.”

Oh...

The mention of GAIA's sub-function, part of her creation, is like the final nail to a coffin she was unaware of having stepped into.

She swallows, pressing the metal of the ring hard against her finger before releasing it, performing the small act again and again as she considers everything that has been said. Raising her brows and shaking her head slightly, she turns back to the king. “For a young man you are surprisingly good at finding an old woman's weaknesses,” she says. “Almost feels like there is no real choice left here.”

“There is always a choice,” Avad says, and she sees a different kind of twinkle in his eyes when he follows up with, “and I would consider you wise more so than old.”

For a moment she forgets she's sitting next to one of the most influential figures in this new world and chuckles. Cheeky. “What the hell,” she murmurs half to herself before looking Avad squarely in the eyes. “Alright. I will stand by you and act as a member of your council on the condition that I reserve the right to refuse any direct commands given to me. I will not become your subordinate.”

She can hear Marad shifting to her right but pays little mind to him, even when he quite loudly clears his throat, because the king is looking right back, nodding.

“As you wish,” Avad says, which is when Marad clearly can't stand it anymore as he rises from his seat.

“I am afraid I must object to your decision to be commanded by a foreign entity,” the adviser says. “A councilman – or woman, in this case – should always be subjected to the wishes of the king. To do otherwise would encourage... mutiny, in the least.”

“She is no Carja and as such not subjected to our laws,” Avad counters immediately, and even though his tone is calm Elisabet can see the tension in his jaw. “Her presence here, to arrive when we are in need of the assistance she might offer, I can see as nothing but the will of the Sun.”

Marad doesn't seem to be faring much better, one of his hands a tight fist before he moves it altogether behind his back. “Your Radiance, I request that we may speak on this matter in private.”

Avad leans back on the couch, resting one arm on the upholstery. “We will, but you cannot change my mind. Kordiniman –” a scribe arrives promptly, and Elisabet considers the fact that the man may have been waiting just out of sight all this time “ – note that I hereby decree Elisabet Sobeck a member of the high council, an exception in that any command made she may refuse, never to be forced against her own volition.”

As the scribe writes down Avad's words, Elisabet watches Marad's face slowly flush.
“I decree this as my will and therefore the will of the Sun,” Avad finishes quietly, all the while looking at Marad, and once he's done his adviser asks to be dismissed – a request Avad grants him.

Elisabet waits until the scribe has left before speaking. “It was not my intention to form a source of conflict between you and your adviser,” she says, but Avad shakes his head.

“Unfortunately it was unavoidable this time. He will come to accept my decision on the matter... in time.” He regards her in silence for a moment. “I would wish to speak to you alone. I am aware this request might be taken as a lewd solicitation by any bystanders listening but I assure you my intentions are pure.”

Waiting a beat, Elisabet says, “That's quite a disclaimer for a moment alone.”

“I do not wish my words to be misconstrued,” he adds, his eyes tracking the different guards on the terrace. “It is of a sensitive nature and has to do with something your daughter told me.”

That seems fair. Elisabet clears her throat once, then rises from the couch. “Well then,” she says. “Lead the way.”

He brings her to a small study in one of the towers, presumably his own – a cozy nest of sorts. It feels rather personal, something that must cross the king's mind as well as he appears almost bashful when he closes the door.

“I wished to ask you...” he begins before trailing off, and Elisabet takes pity on him.

“What did she tell you?” she asks instead, and there's that light in his eyes again when he looks at her.

“So much,” he says, and at once he no longer seems like a king but a boy who discovered there's a whole new world out there, one he didn't know or understand before, but is learning to read by searching its signs and whispers.

“I am sure she did not tell me everything, but she told me of Zero Dawn and GAIA Prime – is it true?” he asks, eyes glistening. “Are you Elisabet Sobeck, Alpha Prime, the one who saved – everyone? The one who did not allow the machines, the Deathbringers and Corruptors, to destroy the earth?”

Somehow he reminds her of Aloy, right at the start of their journey together – that same awe – and it makes her feel just as uncomfortable as it did then. Not because she wants to deny her involvement but because she keeps imagining so many ways in which things could have ended differently, for better and for worse.

“Yes,” she admits. “I am her. I am one of your Old Ones – the only one I'm aware of.”

“I knew it,” he whispers, smiling, though the expression is short-lived and Elisabet can only watch as the color drains from Avad's face. “Aloy's story – it's all true. The machines... the rebirth of the earth...”

He sways on his feet, one hand reaching out for support and Elisabet does the first thing that comes to mind – take hold of his arm and catch him when he threatens to fall regardless. She helps him to the ground with his back against the wall, resting his arms on propped up knees.

When it becomes clear his crown is in the way of him lowering his head in a comfortable manner, Elisabet gently removes the headdress and sets it down carefully with one hand, the other preoccupied with guiding Avad's head. He's mumbling to himself, saying something about the
machines and a derangement of sorts, and damn it, this is not how she imagined her day would go.

One hand still resting on the back of the king's neck, fingers curled in black tufts of hair, Elisabet activates her Focus. “What do I do,” she whispers, staring at the stonework ahead of her.

GAIA is with her in less than a second. “The Derangement is a term used by the Carja as well as other tribes to describe the change in machine behavior after I received the unidentified signal and HEPHAESTUS, as well as the other subordinate functions, became autonomous. The Carja, for a long time, believed it was caused by angering their god and as such, tried to end the Derangement through blood sacrifice.” There's a pause in her speech, and Elisabet knows she isn't imagining the regret in GAIA’s tone when she continues. “Their efforts were fruitless.”

Cursing under her breath Elisabet turns her attention back to Avad. “It's not your fault,” she says because what else can she tell him? “You didn't know any better – no one could have known.”

She removes her hand quickly when he lifts his head to look at her. “I am not like most Carja,” he says, his face still a pale example of what it usually is. “My faith in our religion isn't unwavering, the idea that the Sun would ask for so much bloodshed... but the machines were never angered, were they? They were only... changed. Like the wheel of a cart that has been chipped.”

Hesitating, Elisabet once more tries to pick her words carefully, although now for a different reason. “Yes,” she says. “I can explain it to you, but I don't think it would be wise to do so right now.”

“No,” Avad agrees with a sad smile. He continues to look at her in silence but she's sure his mind must be racing. He breathes in deeply, sitting up straight and resting his head against the wall, staring straight ahead. “There is no Sun, is there?” he says in a voice smaller than she has heard from him in any of their meetings – smaller than she ever imagined hearing, like a lost child.

She knows he isn't talking about the actual sun at the moment. It's the cognitive dissonance of all his beliefs being shaken to their core foundations. She wouldn't go as far as to call herself a religious person, but she always understood the need that seemed almost biologically ingrained in the human psyche to believe in something greater than themselves, and that perhaps, if the need was there, there might actually be something that instilled that need, too.

To tell Avad that everything about his faith is wrong would be beyond cruel.

“Listen,” she says instead. “Without the warmth and light of the sun, life on earth would not be possible. If the sun was moved – only slightly – in the sky, it would reach our planet in a different way causing all bodies of water to evaporate or freeze.

“The Carja are not the first to worship what makes all life on earth possible, and what is a god if not a force that is supposed to guide us? Doesn't the sun guide your people through times of harvest and cold winter days?”

She can tell that he's listening closely even if he hasn't moved since she started speaking, and she gingerly rests a hand on his shoulder. “It is very difficult for any human to imagine a god that isn't in some shape or form humanized with a face or voice... or hands... and while the Old Ones have searched for a god in so many things and discovered that the sun doesn't have any of those features, not in a human way, without it we would all be lost.

“I'm trying to say that... maybe it's worth reconsidering your definition of a god.”

Moments pass, the silence stretching on in a way that makes Elisabet uncomfortably aware of every element of their current situation, until finally, Avad asks, “What do you believe?”
As if explaining the concept of gods to a young AI wasn't hard enough.

She sighs, struggling to find the right words. “I believe... there's nothing closer to godliness than the forces of nature. Both nurturing and unrelenting, bringing forth life and death in equal measures. If there is a god out there beyond these forces – one that is more personified – then surely nature is what they hold in their hands – what their tools are made of, what they shape us with.”

Again, there's a silence.

“We must seem so primitive to you,” Avad whispers, one hand coming up to gently touch around the edges of his eyes as he looks to the ceiling, blinking quickly. “Such savages, like children handed tools beyond their capabilities.”

“Absolutely not,” Elisabet murmurs immediately. “What I see all around me is so much beauty. So much life. It's everything Zero Dawn aimed for, and yes, there's darkness as well, but... you Carja have a saying about that, don't you?” she asks, squeezing Avad's shoulder.

“Sun and Shadow,” Avad recites. “To deny one is to deny the whole of things.”

Elisabet nods, keeping her own relief at having guessed correctly under wraps for the time being. “Can't have light without darkness,” she adds. “Don't denounce your faith yet, Avad. I think you'll find there's more truth to it than you may be able to see at the moment.”

“Thank you.” With more color in his cheeks returning, the bashfulness he expressed at the beginning of their conversation makes a reappearance as well. “I apologize,” he says. “By confiding in you I am needlessly complicating our relationship. As the Sun-King it is expected of me to refrain from... that is...”

“I don't know what Aloy told you in regards to where I come from, but I'm pretty sure my Carjan etiquette isn't up to date, either,” she says. “I used to be a leader to my people. I led them up until the moment I believed to be my end. We're not the same, but I believe we are kindred in a way, and for all it's worth I am grateful you consider me your ally and are willing to confide in me these fears and doubts.”

She feels the impulse to hold out her hand burning in her arm and back, but she stops herself from acting on it – that is, until she takes in the still lost look behind Avad's eyes as he stares ahead of him. Oh, what the hell.

“Wanna shake on it?” she says, holding out her hand. She waits until he meets her eyes before explaining. “It's a tradition from my people. We grasp each others' hand tightly and shake once or twice to show our commitment to a pact or... treaty. Actually, it's a very common gesture also used in greeting or farewell and you kind of have to... feel what's right. In the moment. Am I losing you?”

He clears his throat and shifts, turning his body towards her more. “I am unfamiliar with this gesture,” he says, but raises a hand anyway to meet hers. “A bow is more common in these lands.”

She can already tell it's going to be awkward as hell but maybe that's what they need, something to focus on other than the general discomfort of what they discussed. “Yeah, you just... grab each other's hand,” she says, patiently waiting until Avad actually attempts to hold her hand. “You can do better than that, I said tightly.”

There's more color to his cheeks now but she has a feeling their interaction might be starting to tip the scales to the other end of the spectrum. “This is... very unusual.”

“Listen,” she stresses, unable to keep all amusement from her voice, “almost everything about your
culture is unusual to me, so you're gonna have to deal with it. Yeah there you go, that's a good tight grip. And now we shake. Just the once, okay?”

They shake hands. Nothing else happens except the further reddening of Avad's cheeks.

“And now you too, young Padawan, can greet Old People,” Elisabet mutters under her breath. “You can let go.”

The relief at no longer having to hold hands with her is like a palpable energy surrounding Avad as his hand retreats quickly. “Old Ones,” he says. “Not Old People.”

“Hey, I'm not the one who named my generation, alright?” she says. “And as a note, a handshake usually only lasts about a second or two.”

“Good to know,” Avad squeaks.

Suppressing any awkwardness she felt herself, Elisabet leans back and says, “Wasn't that great? I feel so much better. How about you?”

“It– it was an experience unlike any other.”

“For sure,” Elisabet adds. She briefly considers adding more nonsensical details such as how her pores have cleared and she can feel the calories burning away but perhaps that would be taking it too far.

“Look,” she says, “I know you're the king and I'm a... one of the Old Ones and all that, and that makes our situation a very unusual one, but I wouldn't mind if our future private conversations took on a more casual tone, like now. I suspect you have many questions you may want to ask me and by removing some formalities it'll make things... easier. If you find yourself agreeable to that, of course.”

Having regained some of his composure, the king nods. “Perhaps that would be best. I'm afraid I am unaware of your customs beyond what you have shown me.”

“I'm still a visitor to your court.”

Avad tilts his head, brows pinching together slightly. “As of today, you are a member of the council as well.”

“Yeah. There's that.” Elisabet pushes herself to her feet. “Just... help me out and give me a list on the proper etiquette surrounding Carja nobles. In case we want to avoid any future scandals.”

A small smile makes an appearance on Avad's face. “Yes, I suppose,” he says, “although there will be rumors nonetheless. My reputation as the Outlander King will take care of that.”

The title sounds like an insult, even when spoken by the soft-mannered king. “Sounds like there's a story in there, somewhere.”

Elisabet offers him a hand but he gently refuses, rising to his feet on his own. The slight blush on his face isn't fading away quite yet. “Perhaps some other time,” he says, then hesitates. “The next meeting of the council will take place tomorrow. Would you be...”

The mental groan Elisabet hears at the back of her mind is reminiscent of so many short deadlines in her career. “Just get me that list before then, Avad,” she says, opening the door on her way out. “Or. Your Highness. If that's what you prefer.”
“Your Radiance,” he corrects her, adding, “please don't call me that when we are alone. I cannot shake the feeling I should refer to you by a title of similar magnitude.”

Turning around quickly, Elisabet points a finger at him. “Don't do that,” she says. “You can call me Elisabet. I don't do fancy titles, alright? I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, quite so,” Avad says, laughing.

Before starting to descend the stairs she turns around one last time. “Get me that list and I'll do everything I can to help you.”

The king doesn't need to say anything for his gratefulness to come across but he thanks her anyway, the strangeness of it all starting to sink in as Elisabet leaves the tower and heads to the guest room.

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**Gaia Log 27 December 3041 – convo/prvt/elisabet – STATUS: LOCKED**

**Elisabet:** Guess I got a job. Somehow. Didn't need to show my credentials or anything.

**GAIA:** I do believe the king considers your lived experiences to be sufficient.

**Elisabet:** Hah.

[Pause]

**Elisabet:** [groan] Can't believe I did that. Why did I do that? Get all buddy-buddy with the king after that – Vanasha, after she threatened me like that? Are you sure this isn't some sort of pipe dream I'm having?

**GAIA:** You are awake, Elisabet. As for your actions, I believe them to be favorable to our current situation. The king is right – you and Aloy share many similarities –

**Elisabet:** – just as many differences, GAIA.

**GAIA:** While I am aware of that fact, I do believe the already established bond between Aloy and the king may lend to his reaching out to you.

**Elisabet:** I suppose you're right about that.

[Pause]

**Elisabet:** Hey, GAIA? Where does the term 'Outlander King' come from?

**GAIA:** While I have intercepted numerous mentions of the term 'Outlander King' while passively recording, I believe I might be revealing private information in sharing this with you.

**Elisabet:** You're right. You shouldn't tell me. It's a curious nickname, though.

**GAIA:** Yes, Elisabet.

[Pause]

**GAIA:** Elisabet, I wish to share a file with you. It is not consequential to our current conversation, and I have been waiting for 'the right moment' to offer it to you. However, 'the right moment' is a
flawed concept, as it may take many years for circumstances to align in a way that coincides with my views of 'the right moment.'

Elisabet: Are you... nervous, GAIA?

GAIA: A logical conclusion based on my external behavior, and one I would not know how to dispute.

Elisabet: Oh, GAIA... you don't have to be. If there's something you want to share with me I'm certain I'll love it, no matter what.

GAIA: I have shared the file with you for viewing. It is only part of it. There are still changes to be made to the rest.

Elisabet: Thank you, GAIA. I'll take a look at it... now...

[Pause]

GAIA: I realize that this may seem too forthcoming. I apologize if reading this makes you experience any form of discomfort.

Elisabet: Oh, GAIA – it's lovely. It's... so wonderful, did you write this yourself?

GAIA: I translated fragments of an ancient Greek poet to fit the narrative I wanted to portray. I have spent many operating cycles whenever there was little else to do, changing words and comparing it to existing poems. I was not sure if this would elicit the right emotional response.

Elisabet: I think you got it just right, GAIA.

GAIA: Thank you, Elisabet.

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FROM: GAIA
TO: Elisabet Sobeck
SUBJECT: [1/3]

By the cool stream the breeze chants through apple branches,
from quivering leaves slumber pours down.

A most gentle maiden gathers flowers
shot with innumerable hues.
A maiden with bright eyes and rosy cheeks. Her voice is sweet as honey,
than the lyre more melodious, than gold more golden.
Face me, my beloved. Unveil the grace in your eyes.

Chapter End Notes

GAIA's poem was composed of fragments of Sappho's poetry, put together by the ever wonderful thoroneaquila to fit the narrative I had in mind. Thank you so much for the time and effort you put into it <3
Next week: Brightmarket, Aloy, and Talanah. c:
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Updates have shifted from Sundays to Wednesdays/Thursdays (depending on whether or not I manage to edit everything before midnight) to better accommodate burbear's schedule as they continue to proofread every chapter. Thank you so much for all you do <3

Thank you for the well wishes. I'm feeling a bit better but still not completely back to my normal self, and slowly running out of buffer chapters hahaha. c'x I'm not panicking yet but... maybe a liiiittle bit. c;

Wiping sweat from her brow, Aloy lowers her bow hand, scanning the horizon.

It's quiet, no thudding feet in the distance, no dust being kicked up by machines. The final Lancehorn lies defeated, corruption oozing out of its body. The beating of her heart is the only drum she hears as she searches for any overlooked targets.

By the time she, Talanah, and the other hunters of the Lodge had arrived, the guards had been struggling to hold the line, being shot at by Ravagers and Scrappers as Lancehorns stampeded towards them. Machine after machine had sprung from the woodlands, every single one of them with blood on their mind.

They fought viciously. A guard had been grabbed by a Ravager... Aloy closes her eyes against the memory, breathing in deeply through her nose. The same images from what happened to one of her Striders back in Free Heap surface, but there's more blood.

So much blood.

These human losses were unavoidable, not enough of them there to hold all the machines back. Aloy's eyes rest on the carcass of a Ravager twenty feet from her position. Someone yells the all-clear. Several Carja and Oseram are pacing the battlegrounds, stopping at each of the fallen, checking for survivors and carrying the wounded into Brightmarket.

She should help them, but her feet are heavy with lead. The adrenaline that has kept her going is fading fast.

“You fought well.” Talanah's hand falls on her shoulder, her former Hawk as much a mess as she must look herself. Blood, sweat, mud and machine oil – they're covered in it. Aloy reaches up to touch Talanah's hand, squeezing it.

“You were right to send us here,” she says, gratefully accepting the pouch of water Talanah gives her, swishing a fair amount of water through her mouth to clear the taste of battle before drinking from it.

Talanah helps her wash her hands and face quickly by holding the pouch for her, and afterwards Aloy returns the favor. It doesn't do much over all – a bath would certainly help – but Aloy feels a bit more human once they're done and she's sure it's the same for Talanah.
“We should help them,” she says, echoing her earlier thoughts as Talanah returns the water pouch to her side.

“Then let's help them,” the Sunhawk says. “Help me figure out where these machines came from. There are enough hands reaching the wounded for now.”

She’s right and Aloy nods, following Talanah for a bit before heading to the Ravager herself. There's corruption seeping into the grass, turning the blades black and wilting all life from it. Aloy takes care not to step in it as she comes closer, touching a relatively clean plate of armor on the beast's side.

There are scratches in the metal, but they're old, judging by the wear on the edges. Going to a Lancehorn next she finds similar markings of similar age, and the hunch she's carried with her since before the battle started gains confirmation in her mind.

These machines aren't native. They've traveled far to reach Brightmarket, seen battle before.

Looking closer at the machine's horns, Aloy finds nothing unusual beyond some residue of clay and soil but... She turns on her Focus and, when the device can’t tell her anything new, she closes the interface again.

Talanah joins her, stepping over a puddle of corruption as she does. “Did you find something?” she asks.

“I'm not sure. They've all fought battles before this one, but other than that...” She pauses, taking out her hunting knife to scrape some residue from the horns. “I feel like I've seen this elsewhere.”

“It's dried clay,” Talanah states. “And sand.”

Rolling her eyes, Aloy rubs some of the grains between her fingers, separating soil and clay. “I meant this particular blend. This color. It reminds me of... something.”

When Talanah only gives her a blank stare, Aloy scrapes off more from the horns and collects it in the palm of her hand. Looking around, she spots the nearest Oseram worker who doesn't seem preoccupied with a life or death situation and approaches them.

“Look,” she says, holding her hand out to the worker. “Can you tell me something about this?”

Talanah, who has followed her, squints her eyes at her in a way that tells Aloy the woman isn't sure what to make of her actions at all, but the Oseram takes a pinch of the material, rubbing it between their fingers.

“This isn't from here,” the Oseram says, looking more closely at the clay. They grind it down to dust between their fingers before wetting their thumb and pressing it to the fine particles, then rubbing their thumb across their gums. “Where did you get this?” they ask after a thorough tasting.

“The Lancehorn,” Aloy answers, nodding her head towards the carcass. “Any ideas as to where it was digging up earth before coming here?”

The Oseram nods, and Aloy can hear the sand scrape between their teeth. “The Claim, I'd say. Oseram territory at the least. It's been a long time but I'd know that dust anywhere. Fire and smoke, coal and heat, the rocks of the mountains – there's no mistaking it.”

“You can tell all of that by examining some sand?” Talanah asks, crossing her arms.

“Hey now, you listen here,” the Oseram bristles. “Maybe if the Carja spent some more time getting
their hands dirty instead of making others toil under their damned Sun –”

Aloy holds up one hand, pinching her eyes shut to ward off the headache brewing behind her forehead. “We don't have time for this,” she says, turning to the Oseram. “Thank you for your help.”

She leaves before either can object, not willing to spend precious time on the wrongdoings of the Carja against other tribes when they should be headed for the palace, taking this information back to Avad. If these machines came from Oseram territory up north first instead of the Forbidden West – that might mean something.

Why would they head west before turning around to attack Meridian anyway? It feels like she's staring at a decorated plate with a single fragment missing, making the image unclear.

Heading for her Strider – the same one she rode on the way to Meridian, she can tell it's waited near the city for her – Aloy hears quick footsteps following her.

“If they came from the Claim –” Talanah says as she catches up with her.

“We need to tell Avad. Maybe some Oseram traders saw something, or a village that was attacked…” She checks to see if her bow is secure on her back, patting down all her gear before slinging herself onto the Strider's back. “We have to know how fast they're moving, where they're coming from.”

“Let me ride with you,” Talanah says, placing one hand on the Strider's side, just behind where Aloy's seated. “I can help report what we saw.”

She considers it, knowing a second pair of eyes will have seen things she might have missed... but she's faster on her own. “No,” she says. “You stay here. The troops need a commander they can trust, and there's no telling if this is the last attack they'll face.”

It is the better choice, and Talanah knows it too. “I will stay,” she says, nodding. “Tell the Sun-King – tell Avad of what we faced here. I have fought many machines, even the ones corrupted when they came for the Spire, but if these machines invade us... If they reach the towns…”

The blood on the battlefield still clings to her mind, and Aloy swallows against her dry throat. “I know,” she says. “I will.”

She spurs her Strider into action, leaning close to its mane as the machine bolts forward, as though it understands the need for haste Aloy feels in her legs. She doesn't look back, doesn't have to in order to remember the sights.

Damn it.

Damn it!

She bites her lip, tasting iron on her tongue from an earlier split. Tears flood the lower parts of her vision and she blames the strong winds blowing in her face, blinking them away in anger. She lets her Strider dash through Brightmarket, yelling at the few people there to get out the way.

None of this was supposed to happen, not after she defeated HADES. The corruption should have been gone – but it isn’t, and somehow it feels worse than when she was fighting the Eclipse head on, when she knew exactly who her target was.

She remembers thinking she was going to die during the attack on the Spire, when part of that gate landed on her – but the Shield-Weaver armor took the brunt of it, and she survived. She kept on surviving, beating the Deathbringer, beating HADES – and that should have been the end of it.
A single image keeps returning to the front of her mind and as much as she tries she can't forget it: the sight of a small hand sticking out a pile of rubble, discolored and stiff. A tuft of dark hair, just to the side of it.

Once she's alone on the road to Meridian, she reaches with her arms around the sides of the Strider's neck and holds on tight, pressing her face against its mane, feeling the softer piping material on her nose, her cheeks. She howls, screams, the sound of grief scraping the inside of her throat as it leaves her body.

*This wasn't supposed to happen.*

A long time ago, she'd sworn to herself to find a way to stop the violence. No more blood-soaked grounds because of the machines. No more destruction caused by beings that were supposed to help each other.

The Strider keeps moving, steady and trusting, undisturbed by Aloy's outburst. “I'm sorry,” she mumbles against the tubing. “Just take me to Meridian.”

Doing just that, the Strider only stops once they're close enough to the bridge so Aloy can make out what the merchants are yelling about this time. It has something to do with the attack near Brightmarket – no surprise there – and Aloy steels herself, letting an unusual calm come over her as she dismounts.

Patting the side of the Strider is something she does without thought, staring ahead at the madness she'll have to wade through before reaching the bridge, but she's quickly pulled back to the present when the Strider nudges her shoulder in return. The press of its metal head against her flesh is surprisingly gentle, the blue of its eyes looking at her with... concern?

Which is absurd.

Aloy rubs a hand over one of the side-horns of the Strider's head, then on a whim leans in and presses her forehead to the machine's metal head, above its eyes. The machine doesn't move, but then, with more caution than she ever thought a machine could express, she feels it push back briefly.

She has to remove herself from the strange embrace by stepping back. “Go,” she says to the Strider, who keeps looking at her. “Go, get.”

Slowly the Strider turns around and walks away, like every other Strider Aloy has ever ridden.

Taking a moment, Aloy collects herself, pushing her goal to the front of her mind like a shield. Find Avad. Tell him about the machines.

---

Avad is nowhere to be found at first. It takes Aloy harassing five different guards before he shows up, several servants quickly leaving the terrace where they were setting up the dinner table. Avad sits quietly on one of the couches, listening while Aloy paces, recounting the horrors of Brightmarket. How many machines there were, how they attacked...

How they ravaged anything in their way.

She's breathing hard by the time she finishes, telling him about the clay and sand from the Claim. Something crumbles inside her once everything's said and done, and she sits down on the couch next to him.
“Only one of them needed to break through,” she says in a harsh whisper, her voice strained. “They wouldn't discriminate, they'd take anyone they could reach. Farmers. Merchants. Children.”

The image of the small hand returns, and Aloy ducks her head, gripping her hair and tugging at the roots, hiding her eyes in the palms of her hands. Violence she can deal with, but the countless victims who had nothing to do with it in the first place...

“I will send more guards to Brightmarket,” Avad says, and she only notices he's put a comforting hand on her shoulder when she raises her head to look at him.

“Send guns,” she says. “Send word to the Claim, we have to know where they're coming from –” She coughs, her throat burning, the taste of iron at the back of her mouth.

Someone is quick to hand her a cup of water and she sips it slowly, listening to Avad as he commands that same person to bring her sweetened elixir laced with Ochrebloom. She tries to protest but Avad shakes his head, saying she'll thank him for it later.

“You need to rest, Aloy,” he adds.

The urge to head back out, to find the nearest Strider again and ride to the Claim herself is strong, but she knows no good will come of it, not when she's this tired. Udina arrives with the sweetened elixir and soft hands help her, taking the cup from her once she's done and leading her down to the baths.

The handmaiden is quiet, unusually so, and Aloy finds herself missing the chipper remarks when Udina helps her out of her armor. This time she doesn't protest when Udina reaches for her belt, even leaning on her when she takes off Aloy's boots.

“I don't look that bad, do I?” she rasps, going for a sardonic smile but it feels like she only manages a grimace.

“You don't have to talk,” Udina says. “You should let your voice rest. I'll get you some more elixir.”

It's not the response she was looking for, but Aloy refrains from answering. Instead she lets Udina finish undressing her, silently thankful for her help undoing knots Aloy wouldn't be able to reach without straining her already sore muscles further.

Naked except for a large orange cloth draped over her shoulders, covering most of her body below, Aloy is led into the next room, the warm air keeping her from feeling cold while Udina guides her onto a stool and leaves for a minute.

She returns with more of the promised elixir, handing it to Aloy before sinking to her knees, taking a cloth and wetting it in a copper basin. Setting one of Aloy's feet in her lap, Udina drags the cloth down her leg, wiping away some of the dirt and grime.

Her cheeks warming, Aloy wishes she could do this herself – but everything aches and she wouldn't know what to do with the cup in her hands besides holding on to it. Udina's touch is light and quick, dabbing the scrapes she comes across with care, never lingering longer than necessary.

Once her legs have been washed, Udina helps lower the cloth from Aloy's shoulder, draping it across her waist and upper legs. Her legs are starting to cool now, despite the air in the room being constantly reheated.

Starting with her neck and back, Udina wipes away, cleaning the cloth in the basin every few strokes. Aloy watches how the water changes, becoming more muddled over time as Udina continues to wash her.
With the arms next, the handmaiden takes particular care with Aloy's hands, washing each digit individually. Her chest and abdomen is met with the same attention given to the rest of her body, and lastly, after refreshing the basin's water and taking a clean cloth, Udina carefully dabs Aloy's face.

“There,” she coos, wringing out the cloth one last time. “That's the Aloy we recognize.”

Udina takes her directly to the large round bath, giving her an arm to lean on when she steps into the pool. The water is almost scalding to her cooled skin, too warm to be completely comfortable right away, but she sinks down anyway, letting the heat envelop her.

She pulls her legs up to her chest, her toes grabbing on to the edge of the underwater seat, and rests her cheek on the flats of her knees. Next to her, Udina folds the cloth into a neat rectangle and places it nearby, close enough to touch if Aloy wanted.

“I can comb out your hair, if you wish,” Udina says, and Aloy shrugs. She'd rather be alone, but she knows it's better to comb out any dirt in her hair now than later, and she doesn't feel the strength to do it herself.

The red stone at the bottom of the bath reminds her of rooftops. How different the day had begun, the calm of it feeling like some kind of betrayal. Could GAIA have known about it, could the Spire have picked up... *any* kind of signal or activity in the region?

She doesn't notice Udina has left until her Focus springs to life, Elisabet's voice in her ear. “I heard you're back, are you alright?” she asks, and Aloy can hear the worry, the half-suppressed urgency behind her words. “Is everything okay?”

It's a question Aloy doesn't know how to answer, at least not right away, not when she's starting to feel so *empty* on the inside, her chest a hollow vat.

“I'm fine,” she whispers, voice still hoarse though the painful ache is gone, soothed by the Ochrebloom. “Udina's having me take a bath.”

Elisabet's voice falls away and Aloy finds herself zoning out once more, the recurring pattern of small waves on the pool's surface having a hypnotic effect on her tired and worn down state. She can still see herself in her mind's eye, feet planted firmly on the ground, firing arrow after arrow... noticing the Ravager that's broken off from the pack...

That single guard, holding a lance, taking a step back in fear as the machine jumped forward. Her split-second decision to reach for a fire arrow, rag already soaked in blaze. Lighting the arrow in the fire pit behind her and sending it through the air, aimed for the Ravager's shoulder. It bounces off the plating, landing on the ground still burning.

Her *other* split-second decision, to take her spear and a fire bomb and jump over the protective barrier set up earlier, throwing the bomb as soon as she's in range, but...

The guard is swept away by a massive claw. The Ravager ignoring Aloy, even when she comes in close enough to strike vital cables under its body, rendering one leg useless.

The Ravager dances, and it takes too long for Aloy to realize that the body of the guard isn't on the ground, but bounced from paw to paw, and after Aloy's strike...

*In its jaws.*

Nausea hits her like a fist to the stomach. Taking a deep breath, Aloy sits up straighter, holding it in
to try and calm her racing heart. It wasn't her fault. She couldn't have saved him, not if she'd gone to him earlier, not if she'd fired more arrows instead.

There's blood in the crevices of her fingernails, or maybe it's just the red of her skin showing, but either way she tries to rub it off, periodically dunking her hands under water before working the edges with one of her thumbs.

She stops when she hears someone approach, and at first she assumes it's Udina, having returned with a comb, but instead it's Elisabet who slowly makes her way towards her, wearing only a simple tunic provided by the palace.

“You're here,” Aloy rasps, moving her head to follow Elisabet until she's next to her.

“Of course,” Elisabet says softly, hands moving over the comb she's holding. “Unless you want me to leave – I can give you some space, if you need it.”

“No.” She finds that she'd rather have Elisabet with her than anyone else or being alone. “Stay.”

Elisabet sits down beside her on the floor. “Udina said you hurt your throat,” she says. “I take it there are no other big injuries.”

Despite it all, Aloy manages a smile. “Commanding,” she whispers. After arriving on the outskirts of Brightmarket, the hunters and guards had looked to Talanah and her for orders, and as the fight went on and the level of noise increased, the orders had to be louder. Harder.

Of course, what happened on the way back to Meridian hadn't helped either, and the same could be said for her reporting to Avad. It'll pass. It happened after the battle for the Spire as well.

They sit in silence for the most of the bath, Elisabet combing Aloy's hair with slow and gentle motions, taking apart her braids one by one. The hair doesn't need washing – it's hardly been three days – so when she's done, Elisabet offers to braid the hair again, warning that she won't be able to do it the way Aloy usually does, but Aloy agrees to it anyway.

Afterwards, Elisabet helps Aloy out of the pool, draping the large cloth over her body before they head to the dressing room, where once again a fresh tunic has been laid out. Elisabet helps her all the way through, drying her legs for her when she has a hard time bending over herself, and pulling the tunic over her head once she's dry.

The way to their room seems longer than usual, and Aloy immediately heads for the bed, crawling under the blankets and closing her eyes. “Thank god she's safe,” she hears Elisabet say quietly after a while, and Aloy knows she's talking to GAIA. She doesn't have the strength to say anything or let them know she's still awake, but then she hears GAIA’s presence on her own Focus.

“Welcome back, Aloy,” the AI says, and there's a tug on her heart like a string being pulled. She feels loved and safe, and drifts off into slumber knowing she's surrounded by the two persons in the world most important to her.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Still a bit sick on this end, went to the doctor this morning and while nothing is dangerously wrong I will probably enjoy some more discomfort for a few more days if not weeks. The flu epidemic has been going on for fifteen weeks here by now. I keep having slightly better days followed by days where I'm back to being really tired and unable to do a whole lot. My writing has been impacted in that I haven't been able to really concentrate and write for more than one day in the past two weeks so I might need to take a two week pause if that doesn't pick up again soon - but I'll let you all know. <3

As always, thank you burbear for reading this and helping me out. You're the absolute best.

CONTENT WARNING: there is an instance where dialogue alludes to past rape and assault of unknown characters.

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Her sleep is light and restless, the feeling of waking multiple times following her into dawn, or at least, that's what her body tells her. It's hard to judge if the sun has already risen, and Aloy doesn't feel like activating her Focus either, knowing she'll get distracted by it and not be able to fall asleep at all afterward.

Next to her, Elisabet seems sound asleep, lying very still on the bed, her hands perfectly clasped on top of her midriff. It's an image of peace that is disturbed in a single second when Elisabet sits up suddenly, the movement causing Aloy to flinch away, her heart skipping a beat.

“There's someone approaching,” Elisabet says, her eyes opening and – they're glowing again, a faint blue light against the darkness of the room before it fades away at a pace that almost leaves Aloy wondering if she imagined it.

“Who?” she asks, her throat dry and aching, but instead of blood there's the taste of sleep in her mouth, dull and stale.

“Can't tell,” Elisabet says, shoving the blankets away from her body.

That's all Aloy needs to get out of bed herself, reaching for her bow when the door is opened, and she turns, pointing an arrow at Vanasha, a dark shawl covering her from her crown to her elbows, leaving only her face visible. Before Aloy can ask what she's doing here, Elisabet takes a step forward and Aloy realizes that the glint she spots in the dim candlelight is in fact her hunting knife.

“Why are you here?” Elisabet asks, her fingers shifting on the knife's handle.

Vanasha doesn't appear fazed by any of it, stepping further into the room and closing the door behind her. “Easy now,” she says, mostly looking at Elisabet because Aloy has already lowered her bow. “I'm not here for you.”
Not wanting any part of the situation to escalate, Aloy reaches Elisabet and carefully places her own hand over the one holding the knife, tapping against Elisabet's wrist with her other hand until she listens and lets go.

“That still doesn't answer my question,” Elisabet says, her eyes not leaving Vanasha's form.

While Vanasha answers, “It doesn't have to,” Aloy squeezes Elisabet's now empty hand and says, “She's a friend.”

It becomes clear that something must have happened between the two while Aloy was away, because Elisabet's eyes narrow and her head turns to Aloy with a sharp motion. “A friend?”

“Yes, that is what Aloy said,” Vanasha drawls, rearranging her shawl to better cover her forehead, tucking away a wisp of hair. She's without her usual eye marks, only a smudged out line of black covering her eyelids. “Now if you'll excuse us, we need to leave. It's urgent.”

The clench of Elisabet's jaw betrays the words she wants to say but is keeping back, the fire in her eyes aimed directly at Vanasha. Aloy grasps the woman's wrist loosely, feeling a strong and fast pulse beneath her fingers. She wants to tell her it's okay, but knows nothing she says will be able to douse the fire quick enough.

Instead she squeezes once, dragging her thumb across the back of Elisabet's hand, and leans into her side. “I'll come back,” she says before leaving Elisabet's side to slip on her boots and quickly throw on her regular tunic, tucking the hunter's knife into her belt.

When Vanasha opens the door to lead the way out, Aloy catches Elisabet's eyes one last time, and while the set of her mouth is bitter, Elisabet nods in resign.

At first Aloy believes Vanasha is leading her deeper into the palace, but then they are outside, walking on part of the waterway underneath the bridge leading into the palace. The sun hasn't risen yet and the air is still cool with slight frost. “Stay close,” Vanasha warns, climbing down the side of the bridge to another walkway.

It leads them to nothing but a hewn stone wall, a dead-end until Vanasha moves to the side of it and then completely disappears into the stones. Coming closer reveals a gap, and beyond that gap a hallway with a heavy looking door. Vanasha unlocks to door, locking it behind them once they're inside, and they head into the tunnel behind it.

“Where?” Aloy asks, unable to produce something more than a hoarse whisper. Where are they, and where are they headed? They pass several closed doors, round corners, head up a few steps only to come down some others. The torches on the wall are spread few and far between, the stone path damp and slippery in dark corners.

“A place not many people visit these days,” Vanasha says. “A place some have forgotten.”

The tunnel finally makes way for a few short hallways, and then they're standing in a large, round hall – at least the size of the round bath – with a ceiling two floors above them, and in between balconies following along the edge of the room.

Peering closer into the darkness, shapes along the wall reveal themselves, barred doors with empty space behind them.

At least, that's what Aloy hopes.

“Prison?” she asks, following Vanasha up a flight of wooden stairs, finding that her harsh voice still
has a muffled echo. The place reminds her of Sunstone Rock... only different, and she can't fully make up her mind as to why.

“Of sorts,” Vanasha answers. She approaches two guards who are standing next to one of the cells, the door appearing made of metal, with only a small barred window in the upper part of it. “Leave us,” she says, and the guards salute her, heading up another flight of stairs without a word.

Aloy comes closer when Vanasha beckons her, telling her to look through the barred window. It is a cell, no doubt left in her mind, and in the far corner of it is a bed of hay, the shape of a man lying atop it. He's blindfolded, his hands and feet bound, chained to the wall by the bed, and not moving at all.

“Alive?”

“Against his and my wishes, but yes,” Vanasha says, unlocking the door and pushing it open. Stale air greets them as a waft escapes the room, and Aloy now sees there's a table with tools next to the door. “He tried to kill himself tonight, using one of my poisons... isn't that right, Keshad?”

Vanasha punctuates the man's name by shoving a foot against his ribs, hard, and the groan that follows heads straight for Aloy's stomach. He looks nothing like the man who attacked her at the feast, his skin ashen and covered in a sheen of sweat, the clothes he's wearing nothing more than rags.

“He's been through... a lot,” Vanasha says, a wry smile touching her lips, and Aloy knows he's seen the side of Vanasha people fear. “Unfortunately, Avad wants him to live. To learn, to repent if possible at Sunstone Rock.”

Squatting down, Vanasha pets Keshad's head and he reacts like a wild boar in a trap, straining against his bonds, teeth snapping in an attempt to snag any part of her. Vanasha's hand tightens on Keshad's head, keeping him down while he struggles.

It's humiliating.

“Stop it,” Aloy whispers, thinking she won't be heard – but Vanasha rises, watching Keshad's pointless attempts a little longer before turning to her.

“Would you like to know what he's done to end up here, Aloy?” Vanasha asks, the sweetness of her voice competing with the sharpness of her teeth, her narrowed eyes. “He owned many slaves before Avad was crowned. He took innocence without thought, has many children but none of them with a woman who wanted to be with him. His victims – ”

Here Vanasha pauses, taking a step towards the table, hovering a hand over her tools. “Some of them were children themselves, not having had their first bleeding.”

Nausea growing inside her, Aloy holds on to the side-post of the doorway. “Why?”

“Because he could,” Vanasha snarls, both hands resting on the table. “Because he wanted to. Don't worry, he can't hear us right now, but if he could, he would laugh. He tortured and murdered for the Eclipse and he enjoyed it.”

Aloy closes her eyes a moment, unable to look at Keshad or Vanasha while coming to terms with the scene set before her. Keshad is a despicable man, a fact Aloy had known the moment they were alone at the feast. She could feel it around him like a dark aura, but hearing the details –

Wetting her cracked lips, Aloy asks, “What did you do to him?”
The silence stretched between them has Vanasha meeting eyes with Aloy, and there she sees the rawness behind Vanasha's words. Vanasha inhales, straightening her back. “I questioned him,” she says, “for the Sundom. For justice.”

Keshad looks like he's been tortured himself, and the circumstances bring back a memory kept in a far corner of Aloy's mind – the first and only time she witnessed a Nora execution. During the years Rost trained her for the Proving, he made her follow him to the edge of Mother's Cradle.

Careful not to reveal their position, Rost had led them closer, to a hill with the perfect vantage over a small field just outside the village, where a crowd had gathered. They had sat in the bushes and watched as the Nora formed a circle around a captured Carja soldier. He'd been caught by the Braves during a raid, and was guilty of crimes similar to Keshad's.

The Nora women stripped him of his armor, and each of them took a stone the size of a fist and threw it at the Carja, angered cries drowning out the sounds of a dying man. Blood spilled for blood spilled.

Something had changed inside her after witnessing the event, newfound knowledge of a world that would become much darker still. Now, as Aloy watches Keshad, she remembers the stoning and knows for a fact that if he were captured by the Nora, he would have been executed as well.

Vanasha takes a small bottle from the table, one of three, and holds it in her hand as though she's examining its weight. She gives it to Aloy. “It's the antidote,” she explains. “I've given him two doses so far, and he needs at least one more. The damage you see before you... much of it is self-inflicted.

“I hurt him in ways most cannot begin to imagine, and he spilled secrets he didn't want to give up, but he knew what he was doing when he tried to kill himself – and I will not allow him to die.”

Vanasha beckons her closer, then crouches near Keshad once more and takes a firm hold of his hair. “Open it,” she tells Aloy, yanking back Keshad's head and slamming one foot down on the chains binding his hands, effectively pinning him. “Let's make sure he reaches Sunstone Rock alive.”

Aloy looks at her hand. The bottle is made of glass, looking fragile enough that it would break upon contact with the stone walls or floor of the cell. It could fall and it could even be an accident. Her stomach rolls as her mind whispers of the notion that perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing for Keshad to die here, in a dark cell deep under the streets of Meridian.

But she can't.

There are two more bottles on the table, and she cannot see herself smashing all three at a chance to kill Keshad. He doesn't seem like a threat anymore, even as he struggles in Vanasha's grasp, and locked away at Sunstone Rock he won't be able to harm anyone ever again. She can't imagine either Janeva or Avad releasing a man like Keshad, even if he did manage to change, somehow.

She opens the bottle with shaking hands, placing the cork on the table, and comes closer the Vanasha and Keshad. Vanasha reaches to the side of Keshad's face, pulling what looks like a ball of cotton from his ear. He gives an angered roar, trying to snap at Vanasha once more, but Vanasha only makes use of the situation to lodge her fingers deep into either side of his face, pushing his cheeks inward.

“Just tip it in,” she says, voice strained with the effort it takes to hold Keshad still. “We're saving your life,” she grunts at Keshad. “Take the antidote or you won't have to swallow.”
After Aloy empties the bottle over Keshad’s mouth, Vanasha pushes his jaws shut, wrapping one arm all the way around his head, using her other hand to pinch his nose shut. Keshad struggles, liquid bubbling up at the corners of his mouth as he tries to expel it. For a while it sounds like he’s choking, and he probably is – and Aloy doesn’t know what to do.

Time drags on and Aloy considers telling Vanasha to stop, to let him breathe – but if Keshad dies now, it wouldn’t be against his own wishes. A part of her wants him dead and another part of her wants him alive. Stuck between the two of them, Aloy only watches until finally there’s the sound of air being sucked into his lungs.

“There,” Vanasha says, patting the side of Keshad’s face while the man coughs. “That wasn’t hard at all. Looks like you’ll live.” She releases him and steps back a safe distance as Keshad shows his teeth again.

“Rat,” he rasps. “Rat kill.”

Taking the empty bottle from Aloy, Vanasha places it back on the table. “You sure tried, Keshad.” She walks back over to him and, quickly grabbing his head by the hair, takes the ball of cotton and pushes it back inside his ear.

Keshad howls, hands reaching up, but the chains don’t allow them to touch his face. “Rat k – kill,” he pants, and this time Aloy finds herself listening closely to the way his speech is slurred and halted. “Pain rat – kill.”

While Vanasha starts packing away metal tools into a leather roll, Aloy joins her at the table. “Why does he talk like that?” she asks, already feeling her own throat ache at speaking more than a few words.

“It's the poison,” Vanasha answers. “It affects more than the body – the mind is injured, too. Parts of him will never heal.” Suddenly she stops clearing the table and reaches out to her, one hand touching Aloy's arm. “Listen, Aloy. You've seen him. You've helped me keep him alive. As decreed by Avad, he needs to reach Sunstone Rock alive too for him to experience a fraction of his victims’ suffering, do you understand?”

Suddenly the reason behind this trip becomes all too clear. “Escort?” she hisses, a headache revealing itself as she understands exactly why Vanasha made her help.

There is no remorse on Vanasha’s face, no signs of regret at manipulating situations in order for Aloy to feel involved. “Yes, Aloy,” she says. “You are the only one I trust whose hand will not shift in the night to finish what Keshad started, and who is capable of stopping any others who intend to do so. I know you'll be able to resist Keshad's goading when the time comes.”

Aloy glares at her, using one hand to gesture at Keshad's prone body. “You deceive,” she whispers, and Vanasha shakes her head.

“I reveal,” the spymaster counters. “I show you the truth before I ask you to act. Besides, this is only half of why I need you to go to Sunstone Rock.”

Of course she does. Of course there is more to it than that.

Aloy presses her lips together tightly before stepping outside the cell, leaning her back against the cold stone wall and crossing her arms. She studies the cells lined along the balcony as she waits for Vanasha to finish, then looks up at the ceiling. It's all fairly dark, being underground and having but a few lit torches to light the hall, but slowly Aloy is able to make out shapes... a pattern of sorts...
She's seen it before, and when she realizes from where she understands what their location is to the full extent – the Sun-Ring. This must be a part of the Sun-Ring's cellars, where slaves and captives would be held until their execution.

There's no time for her to fully grasp her feelings on the matter as Vanasha exits the cell, locking it behind her firmly and turning to her, but the undertone of disgust and misery clings to her as they head back into the tunnels, towards the palace.

“The other half,” Vanasha says as they near the exit. “It has to do with Saranah. Once you arrive at Sunstone Rock, I need you to find and deliver a letter to a woman called Ilima. It is a... personal request from the future queen consort.”

This does pique Aloy’s interest. “Personal?” she repeats.

“Yes.”

While Vanasha unlocks the door to the waterway, Aloy considers. She could refuse, leave Keshad's fate in the hands of the guards who will escort him, even knowing it would mean his death. It goes against some of her principles, but at the same time, so do Keshad's actions from what she's seen and heard.

It's the thought that she'd be helping Saranah that weighs much heavier, the idea that this is something she can do for the noble. She's good at tracking people – if this Ilima is anywhere near Sunstone Rock, Aloy's certain she'll be able to find her.

“So?” Vanasha asks, pulling her from her thoughts. The door is opened, Vanasha's hand on the handle, and the first signs of light are reflected on the hewn stone wall outside. “What will you do, Aloy?”

The set of Vanasha's brows reveal that she already knows Aloy's answer before she says it out loud, and Aloy sighs, dropping her shoulders. “... help,” she says, rolling her eyes.

The smile that touches Vanasha's lips is nothing but smug. “Strange,” she says. “I had a hunch you would. Now make haste – you leave from the western gate before the sun touches the top of the Spire.”

Being pushed outside Aloy can see that the sun is already rising, and Vanasha closes the door before she can protest, saying something about making sure she'll get more elixir for her throat. Aloy stares at the door with an open mouth, strongly considering knocking on it to make Vanasha open up again – but she won't have much time and in the end, she turns and leaves, headed back to the palace.

Walking beneath the waterway a single thought breaks loose from the jumble of things she needs to pack and take with her, and she actually freezes a moment before quickening her steps.

*Elisabet.*

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The shutters have been opened from the windows by the time she arrives, bright morning light streaming into the room. Her heart thuds at the back of her throat even as she closes the door behind her and looks towards Elisabet, who sits at the low table, her hands holding a cup of steaming black kahwa.

Elisabet greets her with a nod, the set of her shoulders tense. The sight has Aloy hesitating where she stands, unsure on how to broach the subject of her imminent departure.
In the end she doesn't have to, as when she awkwardly shuffles closer, Elisabet says, “I take it you've been asked to leave.” There's no judgment in her tone, no disappointment or anger, which makes Aloy wonder what Elisabet is feeling instead.

She nods and moves closer, sitting down on one of the free pillows. Elisabet observes her, putting down the kahwa for the time being.

“I can't come with you,” Elisabet says, and Aloy feels a pang of guilt – she should have discussed this with Vanasha, even though the mission itself might be dangerous considering the roads they'll take through the Jewel. Stalkers and Sawtooths are common machines in the area, as are Longlegs – all machines capable of killing with ease in a single strike.

“I can ask – ” she starts to say, knowing it'll hold up the mission. They can wait if they're so desperate to have her, but Elisabet interrupts, a hand reaching out to brush the side of Aloy's arm. A gentle smile breaks through the tense mask on Elisabet's face.

“You misunderstood me,” she says, and Aloy waits for her to explain. “If this is what you want to do, you should go, but I \textit{can't} come with you. I have to stay here. The king needs me present for some... important meetings, and I didn't want to refuse. I wanted to tell you yesterday but – hey...”

It takes Aloy a moment to figure out the gasp she heard faintly at the back of her mind was her own, and she presses her knuckles to her lips in case any other sounds want to escape without her notice. She hadn't... oh, All-Mother...

She hasn't considered the fact that Elisabet might be unable to join \textit{her} on a mission before.

Of course she knew not every mission would be safe for Elisabet, and that they'd be separated at times, but this feels different. She looks at Elisabet, searches her eyes and wonders what Avad asked of her exactly, why she accepted his offer... when this all happened – during the fight at Brightmarket?

She was gone less than a day, and the trip to Sunstone Rock will take a \textit{week}. If things can change this quickly...

It's a childish fear, and she's aware of it being just that, the same way she used to be afraid of Rost not returning from a regular hunt and deciding he'd rather live somewhere without the mother-less girl, knowing full well he'd never abandon her like that.

“Hey...” Elisabet's voice says, pulling her back to their conversation. “I'm not going anywhere,” she says. “I'll be okay. After all, I'm not the one who'll be avoiding dangerous machines out there.” There's a smile on Elisabet's lips when she finishes speaking, and Aloy eyes her carefully, then huffs out a breath of laughter herself, shaking her head.

“Silly,” she mutters, admonishing herself, and lets Elisabet take hold of both her hands.

“Haven't you heard?” Elisabet asks, squeezing her hands. “We're allowed to be a little silly from time to time.”

Aloy smiles back, her heart aching with the knowledge they won't see each other for a week at least, and there's nothing either of them can do to change it beyond giving up something they've already agreed to.

She longs for an embrace but doesn't know how to ask for one, staring at their hands and Elisabet and the point of her shoulder, opening her mouth and closing it again as the words don't come to help her. Without being really aware of doing it, she's rocking their hands from side to side with small
motions in her restlessness, and Elisabet chuckles. 

“You can come here if you want a hug,” she says, and even though Aloy's cheeks heat at hearing her desires spoken so candidly, she leans over the edge of the low table and into Elisabet's arms. The angle is somewhat uncomfortable, but the warmth and strength behind the gesture make her feel whole.

She wraps her own arms around Elisabet's torso, her hands splayed against the woman's back. Her family, her werak. “I'll come back,” she whispers, and closes her eyes, feeling the press of Elisabet's lips on her temple.

“I know,” Elisabet's voice says. “I'll be waiting.”

The low hum of her Focus coming on is next, with GAIA speaking softly in her ear, saying, “Elisabet will be looked after, and I will assist you both whenever you require me to do so.”


They answer her at the same time when she pulls back slightly, and Aloy sees a flicker of blue in Elisabet's eyes when they do. “Always.”

While she doesn't fully understand what it means when it happens, and it was somewhat frightening that first time at the foot of the Spire, Aloy can see that it is in some way connected to GAIA. Something that bonds them. She wonders if this blue light may be the same light the Banuk honor. What if what Banukai saw was like this?

Getting to her feet and announcing that she needs to pack her things, Elisabet takes a few quick sips of her kahwa before abandoning the drink and offering to help. Having traveled together for so many weeks now, Elisabet seems well aware of the essential items Aloy would take with her on any hunt or journey, no matter the length, and is able to collect many of them alongside Aloy, saving time.

Aloy dons the Hawk armor given to her by Vanasha before the feast, taking the time to wrap extra gear around her middle and take inventory of her pouches one by one. Heading into the Jewel the thicker Nora hides will only serve to overheat and slow her down, same with the Oseram plating. Agility and not wearing yourself down is key in warm and humid areas, especially knowing the machines that roam the area.

She finishes tying up her boots just as Elisabet sets the rolled up leather tent fabric they used along the Way of Broken Stones down by her feet. Aloy takes it and her gear, her bow and spear, and then... she's ready to leave.

They look at each other, and Elisabet seems to be holding something back until she shakes her head and steps in closer. “Your friend, Vanasha,” she says, and for a moment Aloy expects her next words to take on a disapproving tone, but instead it is one of caution. “She was wearing a Focus. Hiding it. Just... be careful.”

It doesn't strike her as strange or out of the ordinary, knowing Avad and Marad have a few Focuses of their own, but something about the way Elisabet looked at Vanasha earlier has Aloy guessing they've gotten to know each other better while she was away – but it isn't the time nor place to ask Elisabet for details, so she nods.

Closing the guestroom's door behind her, a purpose flows through her veins, energy surging with every step she takes.
Hi everyone, this chapter doesn't really have a lot of action in it so I hope you guys don't mind... but if you do please let me know c':

I'm still not back to full health and although I know what I want to write in the coming chapters, I haven't been able to concentrate long enough to get it all down, so I might skip one update after next week, but I'll try not to. As always, thank you burbear for beta reading! <3

Elisabet watches over the court of the Sun palace in secret, hiding herself behind one of the stone gates near the throne as Aloy approaches the bridge. She couldn't help herself, knowing it was best to let Aloy dictate the terms of their goodbye, but she wanted to watch her go, as if the visual confirmation that she's gone will somehow help.

Those fierce steps, that straightened back – it's still mesmerizing to see how much Aloy's posture changes when she has a goal in mind.

Udina comes up to Aloy just as she's about to walk out onto the bridge, and the handmaiden gives her a small bundle and a scroll before stepping back and giving a short bow. The exchange is quick, and Aloy doesn't linger once it's done.

Elisabet dares to move forward a bit more, keeping herself next to the steps that lead to the golden throne. She watches as Aloy crosses the bridge, and then until she rounds a corner, disappearing from view entirely.

“I am with her, Elisabet,” GAIA speaks into her ear softly, and Elisabet swallows out of reflex, nodding once.

It's hard. The continuity Aloy's presence gave to most of her days was a comfort, ever since leaving the Cradle Facility back in Colorado. She knows she isn't alone in the city, not when GAIA is always beside her and there are a few people she knows by name, but none of them are able to ground her simply by being there with her the way Aloy does.

She's distracted enough she doesn't hear the footsteps behind her until GAIA says, “Avad approaches.” Turning her head in time, she is met by the sight of the king wearing the more formal robes and crown, giving her a nod in greeting.

“Over all the world the Sun rises,” he says, stopping in his stride just before climbing the few steps to the throne. “I take it Aloy has already left.”

She finds herself hesitating, but remembers the previous night – how this man is now her closest ally. Marad doesn't appear to be around, making it just the two of them and a few guards stationed at their usual places. “Yes,” she says. “How did you know?”

“Join me,” Avad says, gesturing towards the throne. The words could easily be taken as a command, but his tone implies a question. Seems like he's keeping his promise on not treating her like a
Elisabet follows him to the throne, its seat residing underneath a large cloth sunshade. The throne itself can fit two people with ease. Not wanting to assume anything, Elisabet keeps herself standing next to it until Avad has settled off to one side, leaving enough space for her.

“Please, sit,” he says, and she does. The throne offers an immense view – not only of the court below and the bridge into the city, but of the jungle to the sides of the palace and the Spire straight ahead as well.

His eyes cast out to the view before them, Avad clasps his hands together in his lap loosely. “Vanasha approached me in the early morning... telling me of an important task for which Aloy’s assistance would be of immeasurable significance. I told her it would only carry my blessing if Aloy agreed on her own accords.”

“I thought Vanasha acted under Marad's orders.”

“Yes,” Avad agrees, “she does, and I do not doubt Marad's involvement with the task Aloy's been given, but there are many more sides to Vanasha than the ones she shares. She does not relay everything to me, yet I trust her with my life.”

As the sun rises, its light is reflected off metal surfaces around the palace, and Avad blinks a few times before relaxing his gaze when a ray hits his eyes. Elisabet is struck with the urge to tell him not to look into the light like that, but refrains when the king isn't done speaking.

“It was one of my father's greatest mistakes, you see,” he says. “To only listen to the voices he wanted to hear. To mistake fear for reverence and believe his birthright could stay hands and blades from touching him.

“Marad served as his adviser for many years, through many deaths and murders, and in the end Marad helped orchestrate my father's downfall. I presume he would have preferred my older brother on the throne, someone who would take his advice with less push-back, but when the time came...”

Here Avad pauses, his posture unnaturally still until he shakes his head in the smallest of motions. “Alas,” he says. “When Sun-King Jiran fell Marad no longer had the luxury of choice, and here I am, a king who prefers to keep blades in their scabbards, to read of poetry instead of warfare. My enemies mistake my preferences for weaknesses, as though I have not studied the histories of my predecessors with the same fervor that brought my brother to the training grounds day after day.”

He pauses once more before looking at her. “I trust Marad to have the best interests of the Sundom and her people at heart, to find a suitable heir to the throne should I fall to madness, but I trust Vanasha to end a reign of blood before it begins, to strike me down where I stand should it come to that.”

The man who sits next to her would rather die than commit the crimes of his father – and as far as Elisabet has been able to gather they wouldn't stand out of place on Herres' list of slaughterers. If only her civilization had seen more people like him in power.

“I think you're the only ruler I've heard of who has already appointed his own executioner,” she says, and a small but bittersweet smile marks the king's lips.

“I wish for my people to be protected, even from myself if that is necessary.”

“And you trust Vanasha to see to that,” she finished for him. “More so than Marad?”
Elisabet can see his next words being weighed carefully. “I trust them both to handle true to their conscience,” he says. “And so, Vanasha acts out Marad's orders, but she is and remains her own person, even if knowing which line she walks is at times impossible to tell.”

Thinking back to her own encounters with the woman, Elisabet still can't dispel the inner turmoil she feels at the way Aloy seems to trust her, as well. The slumbering silence between her and Avad drags on, a bird landing in the courtyard below, chirping thrice before flying off again.

A part of her warns against opening up to the king, telling her anything said can be used against her, as a weakness, but this is Avad – a man who just willingly admitted to having put measures in place that prevent him from ever becoming a tyrant, and for those measures to be very final.

He trusts her. An attempt at reciprocation is the very least she's owed to him.

“Aloy seems to... like... Vanasha,” she says. Like pulling teeth. “After having been on the receiving end of a rather special conversation with Vanasha, I can't say I feel the same kind of connection.”

Avad looks at her, an understanding on his face that comes across as genuine. “I do hope this conversation did not take place before I asked for your presence at the palace, yesterday.”

Rubbing the side of her cheek with the ball of her hand, Elisabet chuckles. Apparently the king isn't as oblivious to some of the on-goings in his palace as she'd thought. “She did a... thorough background check. I imagine that was on Marad's orders.”

“I asked him to refrain from the usual questionings, given what I knew at the time of your history,” Avad says, casting his gaze out onto the courtyard again. “It is tradition that any prospect member of the council is questioned by four high-standing members of the council itself. I apologize, I believe my attempted leniency has instead caused you more grief.”

“No need to apologize,” she says quickly. “Just means I got acquainted with the more inner workings of this court sooner rather than later.”

Avad nods, a solemn gesture. “As for Aloy and Vanasha, I believe they have fought together. The Oseram have a saying that the heat of battle forges the strongest bonds, and it is a saying I have yet to be seen disproved.”

Given her own memories of her and the Alpha team, even though they weren't out there on the front lines, she finds that the truth behind the saying resonates well enough. “Suppose I... don't like situations that put Aloy at risk,” she murmurs, squinting at one of the higher towers of the city where the sun strikes copper plating.

“Or the people who impose risk on her?” Avad asks, and she finds him studying her face carefully.

“Technically, that would make you one of them,” she points out, and he raises his eyebrows only slightly.

“Yes. I will not deny my own involvement in sending Aloy off on missions that might require her expertise,” he says. “Speaking as a king, her skills are of great use to the Sundom, and these are troubled times. This may appear callous –”

Elisabet shakes her head once with a sharp motion. “No, I understand,” she says. “I have made these decisions myself, handpicking the right one for the right situation. I know you care for Aloy personally, I can see that, and I've – sentenced good men and women to die because they couldn't – because they weren't –”
Because they were only slightly less qualified than the next person, because some of their psych evaluations said they regularly overslept while under stress. Scrapped from the list for something so incredibly human.

Her hands are shaking, so she wraps her arms around her middle, hiding the tremors against her sides. “I understand,” she repeats, trying to swallow back the bright fire of her anger, the heat in her stomach, “and I hate it. I shouldn’t, because I’ve done the same, but I do. You and this whole damn Sundom – she’s not your servant – ”

There’s no surprise in Avad’s eyes, only that deep understanding, and for all that she's wearing – and even though her new body no longer bares any physical characteristics of sex – she feels naked and vulnerable. “I apologize,” she manages through gritted teeth while rising to her feet. “That was inappropriate and unprofessional.”

It's Avad's voice that stops her in her tracks, even before she can fully turn around. “Elisabet, please – stay.” She almost doesn’t, but she pauses, resting one hand on the metal fencing separating the throne area from a steep plummet into the shallow pool of water below.

Avad hasn't risen from his seat, not quite, but the hand stretched out to her quickly lowers when she looks at him. “Your anger, it comes from a place no one is allowed to deny you,” he says. “You are by all means a general, and – if my understanding of your past is correct – to see your daughter used as a pawn in battles you had hoped would never be fought again... I may not be blessed with a child of my own, but I have witnessed the fear and anger of many parents and families.”

She breathes – air cycling in and out her lungs in a process that is thoroughly unnecessary – and god, he understands. He really does.

“This is not the world I was born into,” she says, softer than she initially meant to as her anger dissipates. “Even the world I died for was a world so twisted by violence and destruction it was unrecognizable near the end of things. I never wanted to bring a child into a world where they would be set up to fail from the start, to die a pointless death...”

She’d been so thankful of never having had the time to start a family when the countdown to Zero Day began, and what was left of the world witnessed a steady rise in abortions everywhere people were able to get them.

Being sterilized had soothed her mind back then, the knowledge that even if something happened, no child would come of it. That the only way for her family line to continue would be through the Lightkeeper protocol... and then she'd abandoned that protocol as well.

She’d been one of the lucky ones.

Without putting much thought into it, she finds herself returning to the seat next to Avad and sitting down. God, she'd been one of the lucky ones...

There’s a gentle touch at her shoulder, and she barely contains the instinct to flinch as she looks to Avad.

“Aloy is thriving,” he says, and it makes her want to cry. “This world may not be the one you knew and the one you lost, but you are here now, and see – life has returned from the barren place Aloy described as your past.”

“It has,” she says, still shaken. Rubbing the bottom knuckle of her thumb across the bridge of her nose and forehead she inhales deeply. “Aloy isn’t my daughter. It’s not – I didn’t carry her, she’s...”
She trails off, not sure how to explain cloning to Avad, but he only smiles.

“She is of your blood, is she not?” he asks, removing his hand. “GAIA created her after you.”

The mention of GAIA has her falter a second time, but she nods. “GAIA used... parts of my body to gestate Aloy, yes.”

“Her life still came from the light inside of you,” Avad says, then adds, “from your body. You care for her as though you carried her yourself – in what way are you not her mother?”

She doesn't have an immediate reply at hand. “I'm not allowed to step into her life like that and suddenly assume a role she never asked for,” she says finally. “She isn't a child anymore and she doesn't need me.”

“She is her own woman, on this we are agreed,” Avad says, “but her eyes are quick to find you, as yours are to find her. You seek each other out in a way that reminds me first and foremost of family – but this is my perspective, the observations of an outsider, the only form of perspective I have to offer.”

They lapse into silence once more. Listening to Avad's insights into the way they interact with each other is helpful, somewhat. It still doesn't change Elisabet's stance on trying not to burden Aloy with her motherly feelings, but perhaps, one day...

She's never been called mom before, not by someone who could say it and truly mean it.

“Thank you for speaking with me,” she says once she's ready, and Avad bows his head in return.

“If there are thoughts that trouble you again, be they of this world or yours, I hope you feel free to join me and speak of them,” he says. “I cannot offer you much solace, however I will always listen and offer what I can.”

Out near the bridge, a crowd of people dressed in white appear, accompanied by a few royal guards, and in the midst of it all is Saranah, a white veil covering her face for the most part. From where she sits, Elisabet can hear a drum and snare instrument playing a tune while several of the women sing a hymn of sorts.

“Will there be a ceremony today?” she asks, unable to shake the way the image reminds her of a wedding, but Avad smiles and shakes his head.

“It is tradition for the betrothed to be led here every day until the binding ceremony has been held,” he says. “Once she's crossed the bridge, I will rise and welcome her.”

Elisabet stands. “I'll leave you to it, then.”

Nodding his head towards her as he dismisses her, Avad says, “Udina will stop by your room and help prepare for the council meeting.”

Glad to hear he hasn't forgotten about the much needed etiquette lessons she asked for, Elisabet leaves, not much else keeping her on the upper levels of the palace. Her plans to head out to the communications array have been postponed until after whatever happens with the council, and with Aloy gone and Avad returning to his kingly duties, the only place left for her to go is the guestroom.

It's empty without Aloy. Her bow and spear are no longer taking up a corner in the room, and what little she did leave behind is left in neat bundles, Oseram armor plates tied together with string. Her slingshot, the one she'd been repairing, is placed next to some of its ammunition pouches.
She said she wouldn't need it.

Elisabet runs a hand along the sheets of the newly made bed, her thoughts dawdling, lingering on the fact she'll have this room to herself for now. Alone. The only belongings she'd consider wholly her own are the armor gifted by Petra, Aloy's old bow, and the hand-me-down clothes that at some point belonged to Aloy as well.

She touches her fingers to the beads at the bottom of the braids in her hair, the same locks Aloy wove together at the start of their journey. “Where is she?” she asks quietly, and GAIA is with her in an instant.

“Aloy is headed outside the city. She is safe.”

Hearing the added reassurance of Aloy's safety drives home how transparent her worrying must be. That, and the conversation with Avad, which GAIA no doubt overheard.

Sitting down, folding her legs underneath her, Elisabet rests both hands face down on the table, the flats of her palms touching the wooden edge. There's no need for her to stand or walk or do anything, and there's nothing she needs to do except wait for Udina.

“Would you like to play a game, Elisabet?” GAIA asks, and Elisabet is promptly reminded of an old movie Travis insisted on watching New Year's night. Most Alphas disapproved. Actually, she's pretty sure at one point it was just her and Travis drinking what little booze was available and yelling at long gone actors to *not do the thing*.

“Is it real or is it a game?” she replies, unsure if the choice of words GAIA used is deliberate or not until the AI responds.

“I was going to suggest chess and not thermonuclear warfare, seeing how the latter would take more time to set up and goes directly against my prime directives,” GAIA answers, and Elisabet snorts, even if the joke is a bit in bad taste.

It's... still pretty funny, to her.

“Chess it is,” she says, leaning one elbow on the table to rest her chin in the palm of her hand. “I'll be black.”

Conjuring up a board of chess is hardly a challenge for GAIA, the hologram appearing in full detail, portrayed to rest on the table itself instead of floating aimlessly in the air. The AI moves a pawn to d4, and without overthinking her own move too much she asks for her knight to go to f6.

It doesn't take too long for Elisabet to realize that GAIA is going easy on her, and she finds that she doesn't particularly mind. She isn't looking for a challenge, just a distraction, and playing casual chess with GAIA provides just that.

She's also pretty sure GAIA made the game end in a tie instead of defeating her at the first possible chance. It's a gesture made out of kindness, one to show her that GAIA isn't trying to win or overrun her, not even in a game, and Elisabet appreciates it even if it's somewhat redundant. She already knows how much the AI cares for her.

Their game finally comes to an end when Udina arrives, carrying with her a new outfit and a scroll. The holo-board vanishes, even if it was only visible for her eyes in the first place, GAIA's presence retreating to the sidelines. Elisabet braces herself and gives the handmaiden a smile.
Gaia Log 28 December 3041 – convo/prvt/aloy – STATUS: LOCKED

**Aloy:** Cold, this time of year. [huff] For Meridian.

**GAIA:** The current temperature measures thirty degrees Fahrenheit or minus one degree Celsius. Based on calculations stored in the Arizona communications array and the data that survived the overload of GAIA Prime's reactor, I am able to say that while cold, this temperature is not unusual this time of year.

**Aloy:** Dew is frosty.

**GAIA:** Are you cold, Aloy?

**Aloy:** Been better. Been colder. [cough] Not many machines around. Stalkers.

**GAIA:** It may be beneficial to the recovery of your voice that you refrain from straining your voice.

**Aloy:** [unintelligible]

**GAIA:** As for the machines: I am able to influence those within the close radius of the array. The ones you have named as 'Stalkers' have moved away from the path. I hope this will make your journey easier.

**Aloy:** Thanks, GAIA.

**GAIA:** You are welcome, Aloy.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

Back at it again with another chapter! I haven't been able to rebuild my buffer of chapters to what it was before (yet) but I have written one in advance at the moment...
We'll see how next week goes. c;

I'm also slowly working through answering all your wonderful comments. Thank you all so much for taking the time to write to me, it really, really means a lot and inspires me every day to continue working on this story. <3

My thanks to burbear for putting up with me and my writing. Love you, pal <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The road ahead is long, the landscape ever changing with the trees and bushes beside it. Aloy sticks to her place at the back of the troop, enjoying the relative silence and not having to dictate or answer anything. GAIA talks to her from time to time, mentioning small facts about nature and the area they're currently in. It almost feels like the AI is trying to fill the void of Elisabet's presence, and it's not something Aloy minds.

Not having Elisabet by her side is disconcerting, but it’s freeing as well.

They headed south after crossing the first bridge, down into the denser woodlands of the Jewel. With any luck they'll arrive at the reclaimed bandits camp, the halfway point of their journey, before nightfall, but she doesn't know how keen the soldiers and Vanguard are to travel in the dark.

Not that far ahead of her, Keshad is being pulled along in chains. He's been given proper walking sandals, military grade, a small mercy Aloy is glad he has, even if those feelings confuse her. He is by all means a terrible person, one the world would not miss, but he's still another human being.

She keeps a close eye on Keshad and the Carja guards walking next to him. There doesn't seem to be any immediate danger to his life, but Vanasha's warning has put her on edge. She watches the Carja carefully, wary of any hand that reaches for their hips, possibly their sabers.

Keshad stumbles and recovers, their pace allowing for it without anyone tugging on his chains or dragging him. He's quiet, hasn't spoken a word since Aloy saw him this morning, even if the anger directed at her through his eyes was telling enough.

He didn't see her in the cell so she doesn't think he'd be able to recognize her from earlier on in the day, making all his hatred the same as the one focused on her during the feast. He doesn't seem aware at all of the fact that she's there to save his life, should the occasion arise.

She'll make sure he reaches Sunstone Rock alive, but as soon as Janeva has him in their care she's leaving and following up on Saranah's request, something she finds herself looking forward to.

Kicking away a loose pebble on her path, Aloy runs her tongue along her teeth, her mouth already dry again. Vanasha having asked this of her – persuading her into doing this – still bothers her, although not much. If she'd been upfront about it, Aloy imagines she would have agreed to do it...
anyway, but it's the secrecy that bothers her.

Sending another stone off into the bushes, Aloy ponders what kind of favor she may ask of Vanasha once she returns. The whole situation with Keshad is enough to ask for a reward, and although she's definitely asking for shards to compensate her time and any ammunition she has to use, she has a hard time thinking of anything else.

Eyes out front, keeping track of the Carja guards and their movements, Aloy notices the muddy stains on some of their armor and grins. Maybe Vanasha can clean her boots when she gets back.

*They got this way because I did all that walking for you...*

It wouldn't be proper compensation but it would be funny.

The thought amuses her enough to keep her mind busy with more ways Vanasha can repay her until they settle down for a short rest. A small campfire is made and Keshad's chains are pinned to one of the trees, a member of the Vanguard hammering a long, curved spike into the trunk, securing him.

Setting her own things on the ground near Keshad – but carefully out of his reach – Aloy takes a moment to drink from her waterskin. Supervising Keshad not only means she'll keep an eye out for any of the guards, but having to prepare all his meals as well.

Udina gave her some food that will last the entire trip, so long as she doesn't end up eating all of it before then. Most of it is dried goods like meat jerky and figs, things that don't need to be prepared, but she also received a few linen bags with portioned amounts of uncooked rice and spices which shouldn't need much more than water to turn into an actual meal.

She'll... leave that for later. In the meantime she chews on some jerky before taking the small wooden bowl she travels with and approaching Keshad.

“*You thirsty?*” she asks. There isn't much of a reply as he stares at her. Wondering if he's even able to understand what she's saying at all, she holds up both waterskin and wooden bowl, gesturing them towards him. “Do... you... want...”

Keshad snarls, kicking one foot out in her direction, clumps of dirt flying short distances and not even reaching her. “*Rat,*” he says. “*Nora rat.*”

Well. At least his memory seems intact.

“This Nora rat is the only one here who will give you some water,” she says, crouching down to his level. “I suggest making up your mind quickly.”

The cracks in his lips and the way his tongue darts out to wet them confirm Aloy's suspicion more than anything else, but it takes a while before he looks away in apparent defeat and raises one hand towards the bowl, the movement halted and slow.

She pours some water into the bowl and pushes it along the ground until it's within Keshad's reach and he takes it. Instead of gulping it down he seems to savor it, the smart thing to do in a situation where the next opportunity to drink is uncertain.

The entire interaction seems to go off without a hitch, but once he's done drinking he holds to bowl in his hands for a moment longer, and the next Aloy is ducking her head out the way as he chuck's it towards her. The bowl hits a tree behind her and falls to the ground without causing any harm.

A guard is with them instantly, shoving the butt of his lance against Keshad's ribs in a harsh manner.
“No causing trouble, inmate,” the guard says, uncaring that Keshad howls in pain, trying to move away from him.

“Stop,” Aloy says, stepping between them and holding her hand out towards the guard's chest. He looks at her in confusion, and she follows her command with the most solid reasoning she can imagine. “He'll attract attention to us if he keeps screaming. Leave us, I can handle him.”

The guard nods, standing down, and Keshad's howls come to an end.

Aloy retreats to her own spot and not much else happens. Her bowl is still in one piece, Keshad doesn't move, and the guards give them a wide berth. Before leaving she throws Keshad a few pieces of jerky, which he scrambles after, stuffing two in his mouth immediately and keeping one in his hands. A member of the Vanguard comes round to release his chains from the tree, and then they're on the move again.

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Between keeping an eye on Keshad, keeping an eye on the guards, talking to GAIA quietly at the back of the troop and walking all day, Aloy is grateful when they finally decide to set up camp for the night shortly before sundown. She's sure she would've made it to the former bandits camp by herself, but she would've also taken a Strider or Charger with her to get there.

The Carja and Vanguard set up a few tents and create a larger fire, while Keshad is pinned to a tree once more, only this time rope is added to tie him to the trunk as well. The stench surrounding him seems to get worse as the day goes by, but it's only now that Aloy realizes he hasn't been allowed any opportunities to relieve himself, so he's had to just... let it go.

Keshad doesn't seem too miserable for a prisoner with a death wish. He actually grins at her when she walks past, baring his teeth in a manner that is meant to make her uncomfortable. Unfortunately for him, she's survived Helis and his insufferable speeches, and as much as Keshad tries it doesn't come anywhere close to what she experienced at the Proving Massacre or Sunfall's Sun-Ring.

This deep in the Jewel trees are allowed to grow wherever they want without the risk of someone cutting them down for wood, and it's easy enough to find two of them close together. Even though she could do this later, as the Focus works as an excellent guide for her eyes in the dead of night, she starts setting up a hammock.

It's been a while since she last used it, the dusty planes of the Sun-Steps not having much use for it and the Sacred Land offering many other alternatives, but the overgrown bushes and shadowy homes of many different creatures and insects make it one of her go-to sleeping methods when headed south or south-west from Meridian.

She knows Keshad is watching her work, even hears a scoffed laugh as she uses the leather tent tarp above the hammock as a cover, but she doesn’t let it distract her. She’s high enough above ground that a grown man would have a hard time reaching her and smaller machines would have no trouble passing underneath. Sitting in one of the trees as she places her bedding inside her bunk for the night, she even feels a glimmer of pride in her work knowing she’ll be able to rest easy tonight.

At least, her body will be able to. Her mind will probably be occupied enough with listening for any danger headed towards Keshad.

Sticking close to the man but not close enough to be overheard, she finds herself some privacy surrounded by bushes and reaches out to GAIA. Her Focus casts a purple web of lines around her, contrasting the fireflies that have come out of hiding.
“Is there a way I can talk to Elisabet, like Sylens did with me?” she asks, knowing there probably is and it's even a bit late for her to only ask about it now... but the AI responds in a manner that is nothing but kind, giving her instructions on how to 'call' Elisabet.

She waits for the 'call' to happen, and then all of a sudden Elisabet is sitting across from her, dressed in formal Carja robes, her surroundings not being patched through the hologram.

“Hey there,” Elisabet says, her lips quirked in a small smile, and somehow Aloy misses her more than before.

“Hi,” Aloy answers softly, feeling more self-conscious than ever over the fact that she's talking to what would be thin air to any bystanders. She's aware she's staring, tracing over the lines of Elisabet's hologram like she has many times before, only now Elisabet is looking back, seeing her as well.

Elisabet chuckles, then stands and brushes her hands down the Carja robes. “Do they look *that* awful on me?” she asks, and Aloy quickly shakes her head. “You can be honest, I feel weird in them too.”

Okay, they do look a bit strange.

“It's... different,” Aloy says, and Elisabet looks at her with raised eyebrows. “Doesn't really suit you.”

“*Thank* you. I feel like an old fart, which speaking of, your sympathy shouldn't go out to me but to the people of the council who wear these robes unironically – I mean, because they feel they are *appropriate.*” Here Elisabet pauses and winks. “Don't tell them I said that, alright?”

Hiding a smile of her own behind her hand, she says, “They won't hear it from me.”

Elisabet tells her more of the council, how Udina helped her out earlier in the day to learn the unspoken rules of Carja society, many of which Aloy hasn't heard of before either. Having to judge how to approach someone based on the color of threads that have been sewn into their robes sounds needlessly complicated, especially when those ranks have nothing to do with age or experience, but instead with property and how many people work under them.

“I could never do that,” Aloy says, shaking her head as she tries to imagine herself in those robes, attending the council meeting. Having to listen to people who don't understand the true levity of the situation and instead only care about their estates sounds exhausting.

“I think you could. It's something you can learn,” Elisabet says, and Aloy gives her a look of disbelief. She smirks. “I said *could,* I didn't say anything about you actually enjoying any part of it.”

Aloy shrugs, biting her lower lip to suppress another smile. She'd much rather spend her time out in the wilds than sitting around in torch-lit rooms discussing policies. She's suddenly reminded of Elisabet never having said anything about her own feelings towards having to act as member of the council, and asks, “Do you enjoy it?”

A single raised eyebrow says more than words. Aloy snorts at the deadpan expression, but Elisabet answers her anyway. “Part of the job, Aloy,” she says. “I've done it before. Listening to Carja nobility or FAS stockholders is not as different as I thought it would be. Besides, Avad was there the entire time. I only needed to address the council whenever he asked me a question about the machines or battle strategies that have proven ineffective for them.”

Hologram Elisabeth smooths out the unseen surface she's sitting on. “You don't have to worry about me, Aloy.”
“I’m not worried,” she denies, quick as rain. “I know Avad and Udina will take good care of you, and Erend’s still there, too.”

“And GAIA,” Elisabet adds, her voice gentle.

Releasing a breath she hadn’t noticed she was holding in, she nods. “And GAIA.” There’s no reason for her to be worried, not when Elisabet is surrounded by people she trusts.

“Alright,” Elisabet says. Her demeanor shifts slightly, her tone becoming more lighthearted. “You don’t mind if I worry a little, right? The thought of you alone in those dark and mysterious woods... going on adventures all by yourself... What’ll happen if you encounter a wild animal?”

Aloy finds herself relaxing further, knowing Elisabet’s worries do not prevent her from making half absurd statements in an attempt to make her smile. “I’ll take my bow and shoot it,” she says, miming the movements of taking aim. “And then cook it. I think.”

“Oh, you’ll cook it, even?” Another raised eyebrow in her direction has Aloy puffing out her cheeks in defense, even as a voice at the back of her mind reminds her of Rost telling her to stop acting so childlike.

*You have to act like a Brave if you want to win the Proving.*

Elisabet doesn’t tell her to stop. “Fair enough,” she says instead with a grin. “I’m sure you’ll do fine. The mighty Aloy and her mighty stew.”

Gaping, Aloy finds herself unable to say anything for a moment. “That only happened once!” she cries out when her words return to her.

“Practice makes perfect,” Elisabet sing-songs.

“I’ll show you,” Aloy says, making it a promise in her mind. “Next time I make stew, it’ll be the best you’ve ever had.”

She regrets saying it almost instantly when Elisabet meets her eyes and says, “I’m counting on it,” with a wink. She isn’t a great cook, never was because she doesn’t have the right kind of patience for it, but she won’t back down from a challenge she made herself, especially not in front of Elisabet.

There isn’t much left to talk about, and Aloy ends up relaying a few more details about her current mission – how long she thinks it’ll take them to reach the bandit camp, and based on that the remainder of their journey. Her throat is starting to ache from using her voice so much, but at least she managed to hold a proper conversation again before that happened.

They say goodbye, Elisabet reminding her to be careful and she promises she is, and then the hologram blinks out of existence, leaving behind a silence that is hard to describe. It had really felt like Elisabet was there with her for a moment, and not a day’s worth travel behind her. It was different from talking to Sylens, because she’s only met him a few times now and she’s never considered him as a corporeal companion.

More like a holo annoyance.

Thinking of Sylens right after talking to Elisabet sets her in a bad mood, especially when she remembers her last conversation with him. She can’t recall the exact words exchanged, not after so many nights have passed since, but the image of him turning to her, the eyes of a predator searching her, demanding to know her secrets. Elisabet’s secrets.
The threat of him unraveling the truth on his own, finding a way to learn every detail of Elisabet being brought back to life by GAIA. She doesn't even want to consider the things he might do with that sort of information, having seen how he made deals with HADES for his own gain and what the fallout of that was.

“Can I call Sylens like that, too?” she asks GAIA, a sour taste to her words.

“Do you wish to call Sylens at this moment?” the AI asks in return, her question arriving with a hesitant delay.

Aloy shakes her head immediately. “No, uh. I was just wondering if it's possible. I really don't have to speak to him right now.”

“In that case, yes, Aloy, it is possible,” GAIA says, sounding relieved with the smallest change of inflection. It feels good knowing she seems to be about as keen as Aloy is to speak to the man, because for all his usefulness and smarts, he's infuriating, too.

He probably thinks the same about her, Aloy realizes, and smiles.

_Aloy.

Aloy returns to the camp, finding Keshad right where he was before and most guards gathered around the campfire. A few of them are standing watch, which seems like a sound strategy. She riffles through her things a moment to find one of the meals Udina prepared for her, and heads for the fire.

A Vanguard leaning against a tree by the fire tips his head towards her as she approaches, and she recognizes him without his helmet as one of the men who fought alongside her and Erend up on the Alight. He's slightly older than Erend it seems, perhaps even the oldest soldier with them on this trip. Most of the Carja soldiers only seem slightly older than Aloy herself.

Three of the soldiers are laughing together, unaware of Aloy's approach. One of them is telling a tale about a Carja woman and – Aloy is pretty sure she doesn't need to hear all of it to know what the context is about.

“Anyone have a pot around here I can use?” she asks, stepping closer to the Oseram. The laughter in the circle come to an abrupt halt, and she ignores the sudden attention from all eyes on her as best as she can.

“Aye,” says the Vanguardsman, nodding his head towards one of the tents. “Grab what you need. Return it once you're done, but what you use, you clean.”

It sounds like a fair trade, and Aloy quietly gathers a small iron pot, adding the rice mixture and some water from her waterskin to it before setting the meal by the fire. She's only a little surprised the Carja soldiers didn't bring their own benches with them on this trip and are instead sitting on a few gathered flat stones from the nearby creek.

The Carja camp she came across in the Cut had been decked out with so many luxuries, and given the Carja's overall image she's almost impressed with them sitting on stones and not... bringing one of those embroidered pillows with them.

She doesn't feel the need to use either as she squats by the fire, resting her arms on her knees as she sits. The silence around the campfire is uncomfortable and unnatural, and she continues to ignore it, instead giving her full attention to the pot as steam starts to rise and with it the smell of spices.
Scooping the meal from the pot into her wooden bowl she finds a crust has formed on the bottom of it, regardless of the fact that she was there watching it the entire time. “I'll clean it later,” she tells the Oseram before heading out to her spot again, hushed whispers given birth by the soldiers behind her back.

The rice has turned to mush, but it's really not that bad for a meal. Traveling the way she does, Aloy has had to eat things that were much worse in a pinch, and the spices Udina chose give it a nice flavor even if the texture reminds her of muck.

She finishes what she considers her portion and then slides the bowl across the ground to Keshad. He doesn't throw it at her head this time after he's done, and she takes a moment to head down to the creek with the cooking pot and wooden bowl.

Using some water and loose sand, Aloy scrubs out the inside of the pot, removing what remained of the crust at the bottom. She's using her Focus to see clearly in the night, the stars above only doing so much to illuminate the landscape with the thick trees surrounding her.

The moon's reflection shimmers in the water, white flecks on a moving surface. The lack of machine noises doesn't feel entirely right, even if Aloy knows it's only because of GAIA's interference. Even now, knowing fully well the involvement of GAIA and Elisabet and the other Alphas in creating the machines and the entire world around her, Aloy still can't quite picture a world without them.

A world without the sound of Striders grazing, a world lacking the Tallnecks' magnificence, the giant forms of Stormbirds and Thunderjaws – even a world without the dangers many of the machines present is hard to imagine.

Returning the cooking pot, Aloy once more passes the soldiers at the campfire, who all fall silent with her approach. She nods to the Vanguardsman from earlier after putting the pot back inside the tent and he returns the gesture with slight approval.

There's no reason for her to linger, and after a day on her feet all she can think of is her hammock in the trees. Climbing back up is easy when her rope is still attached to the fork in the tree, and after lying down on her bedding diagonally she remembers why she prefers a hammock over many other sleeping methods.

The soft sway of it as a breeze passes by is a comfort that reminds her of home and the days when she knew exactly what that word meant – Rost and fire and stew, the way she's never been able to cook it. Rost teaching her how to climb trees, how to spot dead branches...

She catches herself drifting off and shakes her head quickly, remembering her task at hand. Knowing she'll either have to get up or give in, she turns to her Focus.

“Can you wake me if anyone approaches Keshad?” she asks GAIA, and the answer is an instant of course. Sleep creeps up on her as soon as she relaxes again, knowing GAIA to be the best Watcher out there.

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Dawn arrives, pale light streaming in where the tent tarp doesn't cover her hammock completely. Aloy yawns, stretching out her feet and rubbing the sands of sleep from her eyes. Peering over the edge she finds Keshad in the same place he was before, although he does look more miserable.

In her recently woken state she can't really bring herself to care too much, and burrows back into the warmth of her nest. A few small birds are up and busy in the treetops, hopping from one branch to
another, chirping and bickering.

Some of the soldiers are up as well, their voices carrying from their tents and the campfire back to her. She won't be allowed to lie in much longer, not if they want to reach Sunstone Rock anytime soon, but she'll take all she can get.

She looks past the branches at a clear blue sky and wonders, just for a moment, what Elisabet might be doing.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Elisabet's POV c:
Hello everyone! I hope you all had a happy easter or passover still (depends on which you celebrate, and also any other holidays out there I might be forgetting that coincide).

The poem is once again written by thoroneaquila. Dankjewel <3 ; u ;

As always, my thanks and love to burbear for beta-reading, and I hope you all enjoy this chapter! <3

FROM: GAIA
TO: Elisabet Sobeck
SUBJECT: [2/3]

Again my heart quakes with love. A storm disturbs the apple tree.
Golden Aphrodite's handmaid
descends from heaven, cloaked in purple.
Love, bittersweet and helpless, has me quivering,
fluttering like a child after her mother.

The full moon rose. Kneeling around the goddess' altar,
the stars, their bright visage eclipsed.
At plenilune she illumines the earth with silver light.
Her brilliance does not obscure her charm.
I know someone will remember, hereafter,
remember us.

---

Elisabet is slowly getting used to the sight of the Spire on the skyline every time she steps outside the palace. It becomes no less impressive, but somehow grows more real over time.

A morning without Aloy is strange. Udina brings her some coffee, helps her with the final touches of her outfit, and later on presents her with a breakfast she doesn't technically need but is grateful for, nonetheless.

The palace feels emptier without Aloy by her side. While she wasn't fully aware of it before, it has now become abundantly clear how much she talked to her over the course of a day.

Reading the second part of the poem GAIA is writing her for a third time, she tries to distract herself, trying to discern the true meaning of the AI's thoughts behind the written words. There's true emotion behind them, the feelings she expresses as infinitely complex as her coding itself.

The written confession doesn't surprise her – that the feelings were there in the first place, that is. It makes sense. In a way she has been many things to GAIA, creator, teacher, co-worker, friend, confidante.

While she can't know for sure without GAIA's own input on the matter, she's fairly certain that after
she... left, even if the other Alphas tried to comfort her or grieve together, it wouldn't have been the same. There wouldn't have been that same bond, the one that drove GAIA to preserving so much of her, to keep her safe for a millennium.

Being compared to a goddess... That bit about the altar...

Well. That might be a bit much. If anything, GAIA should be the one viewed that way – and she probably is in some ways. The Nora’s All-Mother, from what she's been able to learn, seems to come awfully close to the truth.

“Did you know, we actually considered calling Eleuthia Aphrodite for a while,” she says, closing the poem again and taking a sip from her coffee.

“Yes,” GAIA answers, which also doesn't really surprise her. “There were a few files dating back to the start of Project Zero Dawn that referred to the sub-function as such. I believe shortly after the placeholder name was changed to the more befitting 'Eleuthia,' a decision I find myself in support of.”

Chuckling, Elisabet sets her cup back down on the table. “Yeah, you and me both.”

The council meeting took up all her time yesterday and to prevent anyone from doing the same today, Elisabet has decided to go to the Spire early on in the morning. Although the guards look at her with slight confusion as she heads out into the city, no one tries to actively stop her.

Being alone with all the market stands and merchants finally gives her the chance to browse at her leisure, even if she doesn't have any of the common currency to pay for wares. The many fruits and vegetables look so fresh she has to stop herself from picking one up and admiring it at every stand. One of the merchants even offers her a free sample – in the hope she'll end up buying, of course – but she manages to refuse. It wouldn't be fair of her to take it and not give anything in return.

The stall with the machine parts catches her eye and she forces herself to walk past it and head for the elevators. She could spend hours just looking at them, and now that she's alone she actually might.

On the way out to the outer ring of the city and the elevators, she passes by one of the Carja nobles she now recognizes as a member of the council – an older man wearing colorful linen robes with intricate patterns and embroideries. He ignores her completely after making eye contact once, even shuffling out of the way slightly.

It could just be a coincidence, a happenstance – the man might have a bad morning or find her personally intimidating – but, knowing that it's almost always considered rude to ignore a fellow council member outside of sessions, something tells her it's about more than not being in the mood for acknowledging other people.

She can't blame him, not entirely. After all, she is a stranger to their lands and has been appointed to the council within days of arriving to the city, but the open display of xenophobia leaves a bitter feeling in its wake.

She didn't appoint herself, and all she wants to do is help them, and while she's all for people being able to sort things out themselves, her knowledge of the machines, of the protocols GAIA would've had HEPHAESTUS use for them, is certain to be of use to them somehow.

Lost in thought, she doesn't pay much attention to the other person jumping inside the elevator before the doors are closed until they decide to stand slightly closer to her than most Carja would. It's Erend,
red in the face and seemingly out of breath.

“Well, would you look at that,” he says, laughing with a nervous undertone. His armor rattles as he wipes a hand across his forehead. “Who would've guessed we would meet like this!”

“Did you run the entire way from the palace just to catch up with me?”

He laughs again, setting both hands on his hips and throwing his head back slightly while very obviously being unable to meet her eyes. “Why would I – catch up with you? I'm not some kind of –

“Babysitter?” Elisabet supplies, and most of that awkwardness and desperate denial is replaced by genuine bewilderment. “A nanny. A child carer. A nursemaid.”

“Oh,” he says. “Yeah, that's what I meant. Babysitter – is that what the Nora call it?”

Leaning against the back of the elevator, Elisabet shrugs. “Sure.”

“Sounds a bit – violent.”

“Sounds like you're not answering my question,” Elisabet says, giving Erend a look that results in him squirming in his armor. “Is that an Oseram thing to do, avoiding confrontations?”

There's an immediate change in his posture and he gives her a fierce shake of his head. “Never,” he says. “A true Oseram runs towards the heat of battle, not from it. Umh, I mean...”

“Did Avad ask you to keep an eye on me?”

Hanging his head, Erend nods once. “I tried telling him, 'she's Aloy's mother, what do you want me to do about it,' but he did his kingly thing and commanded me to be your shadow outside city walls.”

Hearing Erend's description of her makes her smile, the idea that she's seen with part of the same unstoppable force driving Aloy – and there's a truth to it. They're cut from the same wood, even if their branches grew in different directions.

“I suppose we're stuck together then,” she says, “thanks to His Royal Highness and his need to take care of everyone.”

There's a scoffed laugh from the man, and when she looks over she finds Erend staring at the elevator's walls. “That's funny,” he says, and Elisabet can feel the sadness behind his words. “You remind me of... my sister, when you say it like that.”

The elevator keeps lowering itself, the chains of the counterweight traveling up as they go down. “I'm sorry,” Elisabet says, breaking the silence. She remembers what he said to her in the Hunter's Lodge, of having lost all his family some time ago. “It sounds like she was truly a great loss... and there's nothing that can replace a person.”

Even after talking to so many people who lost everything – heck, being one of those people herself – she still doesn't know which words are the right ones because there are no words that can ever fill the empty spaces left behind when someone passes. She can only acknowledge the loss and hope that in some way, it'll help.

The elevator comes to a halt and the doors are opened, leading out into the village below. Erend is avoiding her gaze once more but this time she fully understands why, seeing his eyes mist over, and she looks away.
It's only once they've left the village grounds and entered the farmlands that he speaks again. “She almost married the Sun-King, you know,” he says, and the grief in his voice is overshadowed by pride. “If it wasn't for those downright Carja laws, I'm sure they would've married after taking Meridian back.”

“Was she a soldier like you?” she asks, and Erend laughs heartily.

“A soldier?” he repeats. “She was my captain, best captain the Vanguard ever had. Ersa – she fought her way out of the Sun-Ring, straight into the palace of the previous Sun-King. She came back to us, to the Claim, with this scrawny prince in tow, saying she'd overthrow the Carja capitol and their ruler – and she did.”

While Aloy has told her many things of the Carja and other tribes, she hadn't gone into detail in regards to the liberation of the city yet, but from what little she knows she guesses there's more to the tale than that, but at its core – it does sound like Erend's sister was a force to be reckoned with.

“I'm not well-versed in your politics and history,” she admits, “but from what you're telling me it seems the world would be much worse if she hadn't decided to do that.”

“Avad would've never managed it on his own,” Erend says. “Fire and spit, he would have tried, but it's Ersa who convinced the people. She knew how to push through and when to hold back. She was the hammer to his anvil and nothing would've made either of them want to change that, no grumbling ealdormen or name-calling Carja – none of that mattered.”

It sounds like quite the love affair, and Elisabet's heart aches knowing the inevitable outcome. She wonders what Avad would have to say on the matter himself, especially now that he's to be married to a Carja noblewoman instead of this warrior who stood by his side through what may well have been some of the hardest times of his life.

Something else catches her interest and she asks, “Name-calling? Is that a thing that happens still?”

“Oh, more than you would believe,” Erend says as they cross a wooden bridge, moving on to the open fields that lead to the Spire's mesa. “No one will say it to a member of the palace but mouths run where liquor flows.”

Stopping for a moment by the edge of one the fields, Elisabet crouches down and touches the frosted dew on one of the yellowed and dried out stalks from an earlier harvest of maize. “Things like Outlander King?” she asks, remembering the phrase.

Erend regards her with slight surprise when she rises to her full height again. “Where did you...” He shakes his head. “But yes, that's one of them. He got that one from associating closely with outlanders... and the way he looked at Aloy before the battle for the Spire didn't help, either.”

“Yeah?” Elisabet squints her eyes at him, looking up to meet his gaze, taking in the grin on his face. The rising sun shines behind his silhouette. “And what way was that?”

“Oh, um...” He coughs, eyes darting to the side. “Nothing. Forget I said anything.”

Humming, Elisabet lets the conversation rest even as the metaphorical gears inside her head are still turning at full speed. Erend makes it seem like Avad wasn't just interested in Aloy for her capabilities, even if she hasn't seen any indications of that herself so far.

It's something she knows she'll remember, later.

For now, as they leave the farmlands and head into the open fields, looking dead ahead at the mesa
carrying the Spire, a different kind of anticipation fills her. Knowing she's this close to GAIA, she reaches out as much as she can with her mind, trying to feel at the edges to see if GAIA is already there.

It feels like there's more than emptiness, but it could also be her imagining things.

GAIA?

She projects the thought, imagines it pushing beyond the limiting form of her body and into the air, and then there's a sudden wave of understanding and welcoming, strong enough to make her stop in her tracks.

Closing her eyes she can clearly sense the presence reaching out to her from the Spire, the familiarity of it like she has always known the way GAIA's mind would feel. It warms her, a feeling of trust reaching deep inside and nestling itself in her bones, her heart.

The moment is interrupted by a hand on her shoulder and Erend's concerned face next to her. He doesn't understand because – of course he doesn't. He probably isn't even aware of GAIA's existence, so how would he be able to understand any part of what's happening beyond her sudden stop.

“I'm okay,” she says, and struggles to decide how much she'll tell him when he surprises her by saying, “It's the Spire, right? You can talk to it. Is it... telling you something urgent?”

His words stun her to the point where she's just staring at first before laughing. “No, it's alright,” she says quickly after. “The Spire is just... glad I'm here.”

There's a quiet oh from the man and his hand falls from her shoulder. “That's – good. Right? I mean it sounds like a good thing.”

“It's good,” she assures him.

They stand in the middle of the open a moment longer before Erend fidgets, hands at his sides, turning one of his feet on its heel as he checks out the toe of his boot.

“Can you uh – ”

“We should – let's just – ”

“Go,” Erend says, finishing her sentence for her. “Yeah.”

They start walking again in silence, setting one foot in front of the other on a path that has existed for much longer than Elisabet has been alive and at the same time came to be because of her. Because of them, her team of Alphas, Betas, and Gammas.

It doesn't stop being any less impressive of a thought even after having walked around in this newborn world for a few months now. It's a thought that is so immense, so powerful – to see all their work realized – that she's quite convinced she can feel the earth moving under her feet because of it until it becomes a more pronounced pounding and the very next second, Erend is putting himself between her and its source.

A Strider is running towards them, a few of its mates not far behind. It takes Elisabet a moment to realize that Erend is perceiving them as a threat, reaching for the warhammer on his back.

“Calm now,” she says, moving around him and laying a hand on his shoulder, patting the armor. She
keeps her eyes on the machines, but they all seem alright.

“Stay back,” Erend says, his eyes darting from her to the Striders. “I mean please stay back, these are dangerous machines.”

The Strider at the front is coming to a halt, its head moving from taking in Elisabet to looking at Erend and back again. It whirs, shaking its neck almost like a horse, its eyes still blue but Elisabet can tell the machine is somewhat unnerved.

“It's okay,” she says, the words meant for both Erend and Strider before she steps forward, hands held out towards the machine. It takes a step back from her and she doesn't need to turn around to know that Erend is doing something, so she says, “Stop what you're doing and stay there a second, alright, Erend? It's not going to attack me.”

There are some sputtered words behind her but the reaction of the Strider tells her all she needs to know – that Erend has indeed stopped whatever it was he was going to do and is staying in place. Keeping her eyes on the Strider she closes in, touching one side of its head first and then stroking her other hand along one of its horns.

“Oh hello,” she coos when it gently butts its head into her hands, whirring again. There's something familiar about the machine, a feeling they've met before, but having no way to confirm it herself and seeing how all machines of its kind are made with the same components and materials, she settles for consulting GAIA through a holo-text.

“Yes, Elisabet,” the AI answers through her Focus. “This is the same acquisition machine that traveled with you from the Free Heap establishment.”

“Thanks.” She strokes the Strider's horn again, rubbing her thumb over the ridges and holes in its material. “I thought I recognized you.”

The machine nudges her, almost nuzzling her hands. As its brethren come closer it sends out another whir, and while the other Striders seem more on edge than Elisabet's travel companion, their eyes haven't shifted to red yet.

The Strider steps aside to let the two newcomers approach and Elisabet can almost feel Erend's impending aneurysm behind her. “Steady,” she says, speaking to all of them again.

With great care, placing its feet on the ground with slow precision, one of them lowers its head, eyes aimed at Elisabet's outstretched arm. They touch, Elisabet's hand on the side of its eyes, the black metal following the round shape of the lens, and all she needs to do is think.

The orange light melts away, making place for a brighter, more vibrant blue. The Strider pulls its head back for a second, whirs, and then bumps the top of its head against her body, making Elisabet stumble.

Another excited cry from the machine has her plant her feet more firmly in the ground before the Strider pushes against her again, and she pats the side of its neck, putting her other hand on the top of its head, gently steering it away from her.

“Alright, alright,” she says, unable to stop a smile from forming on her lips. The Strider from Free Heap actually comes over to intervene, headbutting the more pushy Strider to the side so the final one of their group can come closer, seeming almost shy compared to the other two.

It stops just before touching her, taking all of her in, and then lowers its head, even going as far as dropping down on its front legs. The orange hue disappears before Elisabet reaches out to touch it,
the original, more dimmed blue shining through its lens, and when Elisabet's hand strokes its forehead that blue brightens as well.

The final Strider rises, softly brushes its forehead against Elisabet's shoulder, and backs away. All three of them are looking at her, and there's a breathless ache inside Elisabet's chest.

"Are you getting this?" she whispers in awe, barely registering GAIA's affirmative answer as she witnesses the machines' responses. On a technical level she understands it's because she's using her emergency protocol, the one GAIA gave her with probably slightly different emergencies in mind – but that should in no way intervene with the machines' behavior, not in the manner she's seeing here. Their responses seem to be linked to personality quirks, and although it's something they've discussed in the boardroom it wasn't high on the list of priorities, mostly left to GAIA to figure out later because a personality core wasn't necessary for the terraforming machines to function.

Maybe Margo added that after GAIA Prime was sealed, but considering all the other things they would have wanted to finish instead there's a second answer that is becoming more and more likely.

The moment is shattered by the rattle of armor behind her and three pairs of blue eyes lifting, all aimed at the man behind her. Elisabet looks back, finding Erend in the same spot she left him, warhammer in his hands and a very, very unsettled expression on his face.

"Is this how Aloy does it?" he asks, and while he isn't moving his body his eyes dart to his left, to the more excitable Strider who is looking straight at him. "I thought she used her spear," Erend says, his voice slightly higher, and Elisabet heads back to him, seeing the Strider taking confident strides forward as well.

"Just stay calm. It's not going to attack you," she tells him even as she doubts her own statement. Last time she did this was with Aloy, and there's a chance these Striders will not be as keen to accept Erend as an ally – but she can always shield Erend using her own body if the need arises.

She's also fairly sure GAIA would be able to intervene as well, this close to the Spire, and wonders if the AI might be doing that already.

The Strider is close enough for Elisabet to reach out and put her hand on its forehead again, and she pushes back slightly when it tries to encroach on Erend's personal space. "This is Erend," she says firmly. "He's a friend. Be gentle."

Do the machines even recognize spoken language?

At least it isn't trying to stomp Erend, but Elisabet keeps her hand on the Strider's forehead, pushing it back when it deliberately nudges Erend's shoulder. "Gentle," she repeats, and the machine whirs, settling for headbutting Elisabet's shoulder instead.

Elisabet pats the Strider's neck once more while Erend stays perfectly still, looking about as comfortable as someone going up their first roller coaster. The Strider seems to sniff him as it's being pet by Elisabet, and then the machine can't help itself and tries to go for the armor again.

"Alright, enough." Swatting the side of the Strider lightly, Elisabet points at its companions. "Off you go."

There's a little more pushing and convincing but then the Strider leaves, looking over its shoulder a few times as it trots away. Back together, the three machines head for a spot in the clearing where the vegetation is tallest, and it doesn't take long for one of them to start grazing.
“Well that was... mildly terrifying,” Elisabet says, and next to her Erend's armor rattles as he finally relaxes somewhat, putting the warhammer back in its holster.

“Mildly?” he repeats. “I haven't seen a Strider do that even before the Derangement.”

Elisabet pats his shoulder, still able to recall the precise feeling of metal and tubes under her hand. “Let's go,” she says, not wanting to risk a repeat performance and losing even more time, nor feeling like trying to explain a phenomenon she doesn't understand fully herself.

There's no protest from Erend, and together they begin the climb along the side of the mesa.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I made a few changes to the overall fic today that I wanted to notify you all of first. I've added Second Dawn to a series which also includes CZGoldEdition's Identity because we both feel like they exist in the same universe so it was only fitting to do that, too.

Which brings me to the second change: I've added a note at the bottom of the fic with the works inspired by Second Dawn, which is amazing -- I can hardly believe that my writing has inspired some of you to write your own stories! I'm so happy it has, and having read both of them I am happy to recommend them to anyone who would like to read more stories with Elisabets that aren't dead, here they are:

Healing the World, Just a Little by StardustAndAsh
Human Gods by Aizazadi

I'm really looking forward to reading more of them - AND SPEAKING OF THINGS I LIKE TO READ, I wanted to do a shout-out to a different kind of fic but one I think is absolutely worth a read: laburnum by alpacas, a great story detailing Ersa's time alive in the Sun palace and how she and Avad take back Meridian. It's funny, sad, heartbreaking and has great political drama, so if you're looking for something to read... please go check it out? The author is a gem, too, and I know it would absolutely make her day. c:

[steps down] So anyway, thank you all for continuing to read my story and I really hope you'll keep enjoying it, too. As always, I donate a small percent of my undying soul to burbear, who reads aloud all my written dialogue before anyone else gets to see it.
Thank you so much, pal. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cold metal pressing to her forehead is becoming a familiar sensation, as is the feeling of falling into the Spire, but nothing compares to the sight of GAIA waiting for her, greeting her with open arms.

Elisabet sighs, nestling herself into the embrace, the lack of corporeal form more than being made up for by the feeling of her edges melding with GAIA's. “I have missed you,” she says, the words slipping out before she's even fully aware of it happening.

“I am always with you,” GAIA says with a smile. “Therefore there is no cause for you to miss me.”

Pushing a mixture of amusement and exasperation to the border of their minds, Elisabet rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

While GAIA doesn't merit her words with a spoken response, Elisabet can get a sense of the AI's own mirthfulness just by leaning into her. There are many thoughts, many feelings Elisabet can barely grasp at the speed they whiz past, but the ones she manages to touch are mostly about her or Aloy.
There's a second where she sees a muddied road in front of her, the sound of Carja armor clinking and rattling nearby, and trees everywhere.

Pulling back from the vision GAIA immediately answers her unspoken query, letting her know she's correct in her guess and that it was the view from Aloy's Focus at the current time.

“I am with her, too,” GAIA says, and Elisabet sees several different flashes, different moments recorded by Aloy's Focus. She even sees herself in there, her holo-form talking to Aloy from the guest room in the palace.

“I shouldn't spy on your memories.”

GAIA's smile never seems to waver, her green robe blooming with flora, its curves wrapping around them both. “You are not spying, Elisabet,” she says. “I am showing you them.”

Her heart aches at the admission, knowing it's a sign of GAIA's trust.

“What about the Striders, just now?” she asks, recalling the way the machines came up to her. It feels like something that happened far off, in a distant past, even if it's hardly been half an hour. “Were they acting the way you designed them? Did you influence them?”

Information floods her, moments where GAIA considered the possibilities of giving the machines personalities and how she set HEPHAESTUS to work on them in the end, allowing the creations to retain a sense of memory in the form of a log. How those logs developed, each iteration of new machines more advanced than their predecessors.

There's a gap in the information, a period of time as brief as a breath but indicative of so much change, and then GAIA shows her new assessments – things she's discovered making recordings of the machines as they are now using the instruments left behind in HEPHAESTUS' tool kit.

It would take her days to figure out what each change means exactly and how it resulted in the machines acting the way they do, but Elisabet is able to get the gist of it. All GAIA is doing is taking away that hostile outer layer when they come in range of the Spire – the memories and personality quirks being something she cannot influence as easily, if at all.

“It's amazing,” she whispers, unable to hide the awe she feels at seeing it all laid out before her, and GAIA's mirth grows.

They settle into their regular working rhythm. Being this close to GAIA and working with such focus, it doesn't! take long for Elisabet to lose her sense of self, becoming attuned to solving the puzzle before them completely.

At the end of their session she draws back, stepping away from the Spire's surface, sporting a masterful headache.

The climb down from the foot of the Spire takes more effort than usual, and when Elisabet reaches a fallen stone pillar she's grateful to sit down and hang her head a while, closing her eyes against the pounding inside.

They're closer now than they were before, getting a firmer grasp on MINERVA's encryptions, but the sub-function herself is still absent. GAIA is able to place herself in MINERVA's seat and access most of the tools, so to speak, but there's no one there in the first place to unseat.

Even full access to MINERVA’s kit means almost nothing without the sub-function’s innate knowledge to unlock it.
It's frustrating, even if GAIA insists that they're making progress. Elisabet knows she's being impatient but she wants to see the results of their labor now.

Erend's heavy footsteps are a welcome distraction from her silent sulking, drawing her back to reality, opening her eyes to see the battle-scarred corpse of the Khopesh in the middle of the plateau.

He scuffles beside the pillar a moment before sitting down, clearly deliberating with himself. “I don't mean to presume...”

Shaking her head, Elisabet looks up at him briefly, then casts her eyes down again when the bright sky overwhelms her. “Yeah, no,” she says. “I'm done for the day. Done with the Spire, anyway.”

“Need a drink?”

The offer comes out in such a natural way, like it's truly the first thing that comes to Erend's mind when he tries to find a way to bring comfort to the situation, that Elisabet can't contain her snorted laugh. “Alright, yeah, sure,” she says, and watches him leave for the tent with supplies.

She rubs a hand over the ridges of her forehead, the wrinkles more pronounced as she frowns, willing the headache away. It's only code, she thinks to herself, trying to convince her inhuman body to simply delete the sensations – not that it's working.

Don't you think I should be able to do that? she thinks, projecting the thought towards the Spire, and there's the briefest brush of GAIA's mind to hers, a whisper in a breeze as it passes by, leaving a lingering sensation of warmth and compassion.

GAIA is keeping her distance and Elisabet understands why – her headache is the byproduct of their prolonged joining and any further communication that way might make it worse. She wouldn't mind it that much at the moment, and she's fairly sure GAIA knows that too, the discomfort just an experience that will pass and in her mind more than worth it to be able to be that close to GAIA.

She's the center of her universe in those moments, her worries and memories pushed to the back of her mind. What she shares with GAIA – it's not like anything she has ever experienced before, not with family or lovers. It's the pull of the tide, the changing of the seasons, easy as breathing and soft like painless sleep.

Is it because I created you? she asks, and GAIA's gentle touch is back, unable to stay away when she reaches out.

There's a flash of an image and a claustrophobic feeling surrounding it, a dying stretch of land and the ruins of her childhood home before her. A sharp stinging sensation hits the corners of her eyes – in her mind only – and her chest tightens.

She can hear her dying words to GAIA, the sound of them much clearer than in her own memory and she knows, she knows this isn't her own recording of the event. Elisabet feels the ghost of two arms around her, holding her through her grief.

I'm so sorry, she thinks, unable to find her voice to speak the words, but GAIA’s warmth embraces her mind and even as the headache grows she finds comfort in her presence. GAIA tries to convince her there's nothing she should apologize for, that she would have died one way or another.

I should have predicted your actions, she replies. I should have known, somehow.

GAIA's devotion to her has always been more than a simple connection. While no one has ever replicated a human mind as perfectly as GAIA has with her, she had known about GAIA's interest in
the subject. She should have been able to foresee a situation where she'd try to save her in the only way the AI was truly capable of...

She should have prevented it.

There's a sharp rebuke from GAIA's end of the connection, a stinging pain blooming at the front of her head. When they both realize the sensation comes from the strength of GAIA's emotions, the AI shields her immediately.

“It's not right,” Elisabet murmurs, aware GAIA will be listening in on her Focus as well. “Just like there were rules surrounding your creation, the Turing Act, the MIE... there were laws in place to prevent experimentation on the human mind.”

“The laws and regulations you mention are the same ones you ignored in my own creation,” GAIA's voice says over the Focus, and she knows she isn't imagining the hurt in her voice.

The worst part is, GAIA is completely right.

“You went beyond what I did,” she answers, closing her eyes again. “I should have taught you how to grieve properly, how to let someone go – humans die, GAIA. They die and then they're gone, that's how things are supposed to be. It's the beauty of life, that fleeting instance of energy...”

It doesn't feel like she's talking about herself but rather just a random subject, a different person who died, and in a way she finds that she is. Elisabet Sobec died.

“I did not find beauty in your passing,” GAIA says, voice flat. “It was a loss incomparable to any other I experienced.”

“For that, I'm sorry.” She is. She really is. Back when she was still working hard to stabilize GAIA's personality, she was already aware that for her to do her job properly she'd need to experience loss and grief, but it was a necessary pain to inflict on her. “What you did doesn't change the fact that I– that Elisabet, is dead.”

“Elisabet...”

Whatever else GAIA was going to say is interrupted by Erend's return. “One drink, coming right up,” he exclaims, handing her a wooden cup. She thanks him, giving the content of it a quick whiff before taking a long drink.

Same ale as before, with her body giving the same non-reaction to it. Despite producing the necessary heat to stay at a regulated temperature, she feels cold, even more so when GAIA reaches out again, connecting to her with limited interference to keep her discomfort at a minimum.

“Ask any human to explain how they can know for certain that they are alive, and the only answers they can give will end up being philosophical,” GAIA says, and Elisabet vaguely remembers saying those exact words a long, long time ago.

Unable to reply with Erend next to her, Elisabet settles for taking another sip and projecting it's not the same as loud as she can.

“It is the same,” GAIA answers, tone insistent. “Elisabet, you have shown me many of your private thoughts. I have memorized the shape of your mind over billions of operating cycles. This attempt at separating who you are now from who you were before is, while understandable, unnecessary and will only cause you harm.”
We'll see, she thinks, stubbornness overtaking her. We'll see. I'm not her. I'm not her. I'm not...

GAIA is right, again. No matter how hard she thinks, how hard she tries to pull the memories she's been making since she woke up from the ones in that far and distant past, she is still the image of that girl with the electronics kit burning down a tree in her backyard. Her hands, the ones holding a wooden cup, remind her so strongly of the ones that slaved away at her laptop trying to finish her thesis. She can still feel the press and release of the keys under her fingers.

You shouldn't have remade me, her mind whispers, treacherous and half against her wishes. You and Aloy don't need me. You would be able to guide her, leading her to the right people in her life without me being here. I'm the one who needs you. Both of you.

It's not a thought she wants to voice to GAIA but it's too late now, anyway. A downside to having a link that personal and private. GAIA realizes it as well, a gentle apology washing over her before she can swear she feels a hand pressing down on her shoulder.

“You are precious,” GAIA says, and it's only because Erend is still sitting next to her, ignoring the silence between them with all his might, that Elisabet doesn't respond with a scoff. “You are needed and loved. I am not human, and Aloy is not a machine. You are able to bridge both worlds, unique in so many ways.”

Why me, she wants to ask. Her existence now isn't painful – in fact it is in some ways better than her human life, even if there are downsides to it as well – but she's able to think of so many people who would have deserved a second chance more than she does.

It doesn't feel fair. So many people sacrificed themselves, knowingly and unknowingly, for Elisabet's vision to be completed. Her reward had been just: to die for it, to pay the price she asked so many others to lay down.

But she's still alive, breeze in her back, Erend fidgeting a few feet away from her – probably worried about her no doubt catatonic appearance. People are still dying, some of them at the hand of HEPHAESTUS' creations, and here she sits, ever the engineer, removed from the battlefield.

“One thing at a time,” GAIA reminds her, throwing more of her own words at her with a smile that can be heard. “You are blaming yourself for both existing at all and not acting in a manner you find productive enough.”

She does snort this time, one hand reaching up to wipe the lower edge of her eye out of habit, not finding any tears to get rid of. Erend throws another worried glance in her direction and she shakes her head. “I'm fine.”

“No, you are not,” GAIA tells her. “The imbalance you experience is not trivial. If your physical body were still human I would recommend trying to exercise in an attempt to self-regulate, however _”

The sudden pause in GAIA's speech can only be attributed to the thought that crossed Elisabet's mind, and while she's rather pleased with her newfound idea GAIA sends a soft tendril of disapproval her way.

Exercise, you said, she thinks in reply.

“While I agree with your attempts at solving the current state of your mind, I am not convinced you have come to the most optimal solution.”

And oh, how she adores GAIA. It does nothing to change her mind and she downs what's left of her
drink at once before turning to Erend. Her head is still pounding and a part of her wants to lie down and disappear, but she's stronger than that and won't leave GAIA and Aloy alone in this world.

“So,” she says, taking in Erend's wide-eyed expression. “You're a soldier, right?”

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She'll take it as a sign of Erend's concern that he insists they have a light lunch first before taking Elisabet back to the village at the foot of the city. There's no need for it, her body fine beyond the strain from her link with GAIA, but she humors him nonetheless.

Having some physical distance from the Spire isn't bad either. Her mental connection to GAIA is much further away and she isn't nearly as tempted to keep reaching out to her, which... is hard, too. The pain doesn't deter her and GAIA doesn't have the heart to ignore her calls.

Erend takes her to a workshop, greeting the shopkeeper in a way that suggests familiarity. Not much later they leave, headed for one of the empty farm fields with Elisabet decked out in practice armor.

To call their situation awkward would be an enormous understatement, but if Avad wants Erend to babysit her, she'll make the most of it. Erend takes a few steps into the field, his boots sinking into the ground slightly. He disarms, placing his battlehammer on the hardened surface of the path.

“Show me what you've got,” he says, a crooked smile on his face as he clearly tries to not make this any more uncomfortable.

Stepping into the field as well, Elisabet considers all the training she's ever had. Shooting a handgun won't be relevant, same as her experience with a rifle. “I can shoot a bow,” she says, and Erend moves his head to the side, trying to hide a laugh with a forced cough.

“Should have guessed that,” he says with twinkling eyes. If only he knew the truth – how Aloy kept showing her over and over what to do until the results became mildly acceptable.

“I know a few moves to defend myself,” she admits, “but nothing... solid. Nothing trained.”

He has her take a defensive stance and from there on out gives her pointers on how to improve her stance, her balance. “I'm not the best at this,” he says, although it doesn't sound like he's actively trying to push her to finding another instructor.

“I don't care,” she says, because she doesn't. Erend fought next to Aloy. She'll learn from him. “Show me my weaknesses.”

He does – over and over, and although they're not using any practice swords Elisabet quickly learns to respect the man's arms. The first time he hits the side of her ribs he apologizes instantly, but she wants to hear none of it.

“Don't jump back,” he says after another try. “Sidestep. Puts you in a position where you can react immediately.”

She nods, taking his words to heart, ready to follow them the next iteration.

It's hard work, even for her near tireless body, to keep up with everything Erend points out, but they fall into a pattern eventually where he will attempt to break through her defenses with increasingly unpredictable moves, succeed, and proceed to explain how she could have prevented it. The physicality of it all helps her stay out of the deep crevices of her mind, those memories lurking just beneath the surface, and she's grateful.
She’ll become better.

With enough strength in her legs left to keep going a while longer, Erend tells her to stop for now. He steps off the field, picking up his hammer and leaning on it a moment as he regards her. She doesn’t feel too bad, her heart is pounding in her ears but other than that...

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Erend nods to her. “You’re a tough one,” he says. “Can see where Aloy gets it from. Hope I didn't bruise you too much.”

It’s only when she makes her way to the road again, relaxing after being on guard for so long, that she feels a change in her body – an ache, bone-deep and reaching the tips of her fingers and toes. “’s alright,” she says, tapping Erend’s shoulder as she passes him. “Pretty sure I'll be fine. Not sure about my skills though.”

He laughs, then takes some more deep breaths. “Keep at it,” he advises, putting his warhammer back in its holster. She doesn't expect him to follow her, sticking to her side close enough she almost anticipates an arm wrapping around her shoulders, but he doesn't touch her. “C'mon. Let's go get a drink.”

They go up the elevator and into the city, first sitting down in the comfort of the Hunter's Lodge, and then leaving for a smaller, slightly seedier place where the person behind the bar seems well acquainted with Erend as well.

Her babysitter gets more drunk as time goes by, loud voice booming in the tavern as he tells battle tales, most of which have endings that leave Elisabet in stitches. Some of them involve Ersa, and she's careful not to make any mention of how much he drinks after telling one of those. Instead she joins him, meeting him mug for mug.

The sun has started to set by the time they leave and make their way back to the palace, Erend leaning on her, alcohol strong on his breath. He stumbles at times, but even after everything that happened Elisabet is able to support him. Another plus for her new body.

The king has already left his throne and there are but a few guards around to appreciate their ridiculous performance. They make it up the first flight of stairs somehow and Erend leads her to the eastern balcony. He rests his arms on the balustrade, and while he's not looking at her directly he sounds more sober than he had seemed when he speaks.

“You're not alone,” he says, “and before you start, I know the look in your eyes. Seen it many times before. Fire and spit, in so many others. You're not alone.”

She doesn't know how to respond, even though it feels like she should've seen it coming. She's talking to a veteran, for fuck's sake, and he might seem more muscle than anything else but he has his head in the right place, too.

The burning behind her eyes plays up again, reminding her of things she cannot have, and she places both elbows on the balustrade, pressing her lips to clasped hands. She swallows, memories of a clogged throat accompanying it.

“Don't know what you saw,” Erend continues, his speech coming with more ease than she's used to hearing. “Don't have to tell me. Don't have to tell me your fears either, but Aloy – she needs you. I'm not the best, never was, never will be, but if you think I can help – show you how to beat the demons into submission – I'm here.”

“Thank you,” she manages to whisper, and without looking at her Erend reaches out and rests a hand
on her shoulder, squeezing gently.

“I'm right here,” he repeats, and she remembers some of the others who once said that to her – but this is now, and she can tell Erend means his words, that he's willing to help her without expecting anything in return.

It isn't just because of his loyalty to Aloy, either. She can see it in his eyes when he looks at her – a kind of kinship that is hard to find and illustrative of either party having lived through circumstances that are less than ideal – and she doesn't know what to say.

As luck would have it, she doesn't need to when Erend rises, patting her shoulder once. “Tomorrow at noon, I'll be in the fields.”

“Meet you there,” she answers, voice rough. Erend nods once, and then he leaves, heading deeper into the palace. She should follow his example, try to get some rest, but the view in front of her is breathtaking as ever and more importantly, she isn't sure if she's able to make her legs work right away.

The sudden presence of GAIA on her Focus is enough to startle her a moment. “I am proud of you,” she says after apologizing for the unannounced arrival, and damnit –

“Stop being so nice to me,” Elisabet chokes out, a pained smile tugging on her lips. “I'm an exhausting ass.”

“That statement is a falsehood,” GAIA says, sounding smug. “You are making impressive progress reintegrating yourself into this world.”

“Making friends, you mean,” she whispers, unable to stop the warmth from spreading inside her chest at the words of praise. “Is that what you wanted me to do all along?”

“I wish for you to be happy,” GAIA says, stating it matter-of-fact. “Human connections have always played an important part in your life. You are healing, Elisabet.”

She hums softly, accepting GAIA's statements. “Slowly,” she adds.

“Yes,” GAIA concurs. “It does not happen overnight, as you are well aware.”

Studying her hands Elisabet is struck by the amount of detailing they have, the wrinkles in her skin, the small nick in her thumb's cuticle she got sometime today – but her veins stand out the most. They seem more blue than usual, even with the yellow light from the torches distorting the image.

*The most human color*, she thinks, and touches two fingers to one particularly risen line in her skin, pushing whatever liquid is inside her arteries away before releasing, watching the vein refill itself effortlessly.

Have they always done that?

She's finally able to push herself upright and leave the balcony. The universe grants her the small mercy of not having to encounter anyone on her way to the guest room and she closes the door behind her, shedding her armor and clothes, leaving the day behind.

The softness of the bed is just what she needed. She sighs, resting her head on the pillow. “Can I talk to Aloy?” she asks, and GAIA responds positively, establishing a connection between them.

The conversation doesn't last long, Elisabet not wanting to disclose most of her day and Aloy visibly
worn down by another day of travel, but she's able to lie in bed easier after having spoken to her and wishing her good night.

A soft flickering of candlelight is the only change in the room after that, and Elisabet pulls the blanket up to her chest, resting her hands on top of it. She hesitates briefly before reaching out to GAIA one last time.

“I'm just um...” she mumbles, taking a breath to steel herself and get it over with. “Do you ever regret bringing me back?” she asks, the question one that weighs heavy on her mind even if she can guess the answer – but she needs to hear it from her.

Even though she can’t sense GAIA's emotions anymore, she's able to hear them in her voice anyway when she says, “Never, Elisabet,” and it's overwhelming and heartbreaking and beautiful at the same time.

She closes her eyes, silencing her demons for the time being, feeling the world around her form tethers to keep her from drifting away. Maybe one day it'll be easier to do it all, but for now she'll lean on GAIA, trusting in her judgment and unwavering support, and borrow strength from the people surrounding her.

“Sleep now,” GAIA says, and she obeys.

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FROM: GAIA
TO: Elisabet Sobeck
SUBJECT: [3/3]

All is dark. It is midnight.
The moon has set. The stars,
the hours pass slowly by.
I lie alone.
Sleep well, held gently in your lover's heart,
your face, so dear to me, speckled with the sweetest bliss.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to thoroneaquila for translating/putting together GAIA’s poem. You managed to capture the precise mood I was going for and I'm ever so thankful you took the time to do that <3

Also internet cookies to everyone who knows what Elisabet quotes when she mentions blue being the most human color~
Another day came and went, and Aloy lies in her hammock relieved to think that there are only a few hours left where she'll be responsible for Keshad's life. She groans, stretching her limbs out as much as she can before peering over the edge, finding the spot where the Vanguard tied Keshad up the night before.

He's muttering again, mumbling something under his breath, and as soon as he catches sight of her he chuckles. One of the guards passing by on patrol taps him with the butt of their spear and the chuckling stops. For now.

She isn't sure if it's part of the damage done to his brain or something else but it is starting to get to her, the words spoken under his breath, aimed at her specifically. She remembers the crimes Vanasha described to her and shudders, drawing her blankets around her.

Eventually she still has to get up, and she does, taking the time to pack her hammock before climbing down the tree.

Keshad's eyes follow her around the camp through her morning routine until she disappears from his sight to take care of her private business, but it doesn't feel like she can truly escape him. He's still there when she returns, mumbling with wild eyes tracking her every movement.

“Eat,” she commands, throwing him some jerky and dried fruit. He scrambles after the fallen pieces and she hates herself for not finding the humanity in her to hand them to him – but coming close to him is dangerous, something he proved yesterday by grabbing onto her leg when she came in range and not letting go until forced to.

“Nora rat,” he hisses, stuffing the jerky in his cheek and laughing.

Crouching at a safe distance, she keeps a careful eye on the patrolling guards. “Stop laughing,” she says when one draws nearer. “They'll kick you.”

He listens somewhat, keeping his mutterings to a lower volume until one of them passes. It doesn't sound like he's actually saying words half the time but a more nonsensical phrase like rababad or rabashad.

It might be a place or name but the rest of his sentences are too hard to follow to make anything of it. Aloy tries to ignore it as she packs the rest of her things, making a mental note on how many arrows she has and adding a small stone to her pouch, admiring its shape for a second.
There's still a while left before they head on, the Carja guards taking their time to eat and break down camp, and Aloy finds herself staying close to Keshad once more. The only signs of his life being in danger are glances from some of the soldiers – the same ones Aloy overheard at the campfire saying they did not think he deserved to live – but with her there no one dares to try something.

She gets so caught up in her thoughts she actually startles when Keshad makes a sudden move in her direction, hissing. It's nothing he hasn't done before, and somewhere at the back of her mind she notices she's started to regard him in the same way she does a machine. Dangerous, to watch out for, but not like other people.

It's a mistake Keshad points out with a single word. A word that, when said to her, lets her know instantly how wrong she is.

“Entity.”

It rings in her ears, taking her back in time. The thundering, inhuman voice of HADES takes a leading hand in her memories, and she remembers how small she felt standing in front of the sub-function.

Keshad grins at her, baring his teeth with glee. “Entity,” he repeats. “Rabashad kill entity.”

“Shut up,” she hisses back, stepping closer. “I killed your god.”

The grin widens and Aloy realizes she’s handed him something he'll abuse the rest of the way to Sunstone Rock – a way to get under her skin. Cursing under her breath she stalks away, climbing a tree so she can keep an eye on him but still be far enough from him she won't be able to hear the things he says.

She shouldn't have underestimated him. His speech may be slurred and slow and awkward but it says nothing of the mind inside his head, which is clearly still capable of thinking and scheming.

Angry with them both – herself for the mistake, Keshad for what he is trying to do – she remembers Vanasha's words with great clarity.

_I know you'll be able to resist his goading when the time comes._

She watches Keshad, can't stop herself from trying to read his lips when he mutters, and bites back another curse when he catches her eyes.

Only till Sunstone Rock, she reminds herself. Then, she's free.

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**Gaia Log: 30 December 3041 – recording/prvt/elisabet – STATUS: LOCKED**

**Erend:** You're here.

**Elisabet:** Yeah. You seem... surprised?

**Erend:** Well. [cough] It's not for everyone. Wouldn't blame you for deciding you'd rather... do anything else.

**Elisabet:** Quit while I'm ahead? I'm not that kind of person, Erend.

**Erend:** [laugh] Forge fire and metal gleam – alright, let's see what stuck around from yesterday first.
The day passes by slowly, but every step closer to Sunstone Rock lifts Aloy's spirits. Sticking to the back of the troop once more, she watches over Keshad, although it is starting to seem more and more unlikely that anything will happen to him.

Part of her wonders if it really is her presence that keeps the soldiers at bay, or if they would have been able to escort him in the same manner without her. Still, the hushed whispers of the Carja have revealed a side they're not willing to show her, and perhaps it's precisely that which stays their blades.

Finally, as they come around a bend in the road, Aloy spots the familiar farmlands surrounding the prison and the only bridge left to cross until they reach it. Without Behemoths around to break prisoners out, it actually seems peaceful.

There are guards stationed in the towers and along the roads, and a few of them are supervising prisoners working in the fields – although not many of them are outside the facility. Very few crops flourish this time of year.

Seeing the prison's walls, Keshad starts to get restless, eventually struggling against his chains when they cross the bridge. It's as if seeing the place manages to show him his future in a way more clearly than words can.

While the despair on his face doesn't bring her any particular joy, it doesn't make Aloy very sad, either. There’s a sense of justice, to see him reach this place inside himself after inflicting so much suffering onto others.

He struggles, being pushed and pulled along to his destination, and wails like a child when the gates open and he's forced inside. Aloy imagines there must be an element of fear to the realization that this is where he'll stay, perhaps even until he dies.

Aloy follows the soldiers inside the courtyard where Janeva and a few of their guards are awaiting them.

“So this is the great Keshad,” Janeva says, hands behind their back as they step forward to inspect their new prisoner, a sneer in their voice. “Not much greatness left in him, is there.”

The Oseram Vanguardsman, the same one who helped Aloy with finding a cooking pot the first night, greets Janeva and hands them a paper scroll. “Orders from Sun-King Avad himself,” he says. “The prisoner is not to be released without his express evaluation and permission.”

“So I've heard from the runner.” Janeva breaks the seal on the scroll, unrolling it to read the top part before putting it away. “Search him,” they order. “Put him somewhere quiet, let the mongrel adjust to his new life.”

Keshad dragged away, Aloy hangs back while Janeva discusses matters of rest and provisions for the escort troop with the Vanguardsman. The guards satisfied, they leave, heading further into the prison to the living quarters while Janeva makes their way to Aloy.

“Aloy,” they say, and, despite their normally impassive face, this time she can see a smile creeping up on the warden. “Against the odds we meet again, and you even brought me a gift this time.”

“Vanasha made me do it,” she admits. “She wanted to be sure he'd make it here alive.”

“While there doesn't appear to be much left of the man I heard stories about, you've done your job,”
Janeva says, “You know my opinion on punishments and the old ways... can't say I'd have been disappointed if he'd arrived in smaller parts, and I know I'm not the only one.”

“Good thing I was there to... make sure he'd... get here,” she says, a little hesitant, and Janeva picks up on her mood immediately, clapping her shoulder and steering her towards the warden's office.

“Death is an easy solution,” they say, showing her in. “Keshad's fate... not so much. He'll have time to think, regret all the decisions that led him here and then some. Ale?”

Aloy looks up to find Janeva offering her a cup and she refuses with a shake of her head. “I don't drink.”

“Might as well,” Janeva says with a raised eyebrow. “Why not embrace the finer things in life while there's still a life to enjoy?”

She snorts, scuffing her boot across wooden planks. “If you can enjoy the taste of that, sure,” she says, and Janeva takes a sip to prove her point. “I'm not just here to deliver Keshad. I need to find a woman, too, called Ilima. I've been told she'd be near Sunstone Rock.”

Leaning against their desk, fingers of one hand curling around its edge, Janeva sets the cup down. “The Khane Sovaliy's handmaiden,” they say. “I've heard of her. Disappeared during the liberation and presumed dead. If she's in my prison, I'd like to think I would know.”

It's hard not to be disappointed at Janeva's words. “But there were rumors,” she stresses, because how else would Vanasha have known about it?

“Not in my ears,” Janeva says, then scratches their brow. “Perhaps in someone else's. You're free to question any of the prisoners. We do have a few strange ones – docile, admitted themselves. You'll probably find them outside. Good behavior is rewarded with privileges, after all.”

It's a start. Aloy thanks Janeva before heading out, taking slight note of the few hours daylight left before she'll have to set up camp nearby. The offer to sleep inside the prison was extended to her as well, but she'd rather not.

Questioning the prisoners outside is easy enough, and although most of them regard her with wary eyes, they answer her questions. Many of them are Carja, but there are a few Oseram as well, and when she recognizes the next prisoner on her mental list – who is standing in one of the fields, removing stones and debris from the earth – she finds herself coming to a full stop.

“Olin?” she asks, and the man turns, confirming that it is indeed Olin she's looking at. He looks thinner than the last time she saw him, less muscle surrounding his form, and he's wearing the plain prison uniform – but somehow he seems happy. “Didn't think I'd find you here.”

Olin gives her a bow of his head, a small smile tugging the corners of his mouth. “Neither did I,” he says, leaning on the wooden rake he's using. “You look... well.”

“You look –” she pauses, struggling to find the right word, “– imprisoned? What happened to joining your family and returning to the Claim?”

The smile on his face turns sheepish and he nods a few times, looking at the ground. “I went there with them. At first, everything felt wrong – I wished to live my life in servitude, to repay the debt of blood I made with my foolish actions – and then I came here.”

“To work in the prison fields for the rest of your life?” Aloy asks, and something inside her unwinds when Olin laughs, shaking his head.
“No, no. I'll go back to the Claim,” he says. “Once my time here is done, that is. Enasha said she would wait for me. I'm hoping when I leave, that part of my life, the actions I regret most, will remain here, buried in the soil.”

It's an oddly philosophical outlook from a man like Olin and not what Aloy would have expected to hear from him at all, but perhaps there's some truth to thinking about one's actions in Sunstone Rock and then changing. Although... she's fairly certain Olin changed for the better a long time ago. Either way it's not her call to make.

“I hope so too, Olin,” she says instead. She doesn't expect much from him when she asks about Ilima, but to her surprise he nods slowly.

“Although it's not me you'll want to talk to,” he says, and his gaze shifts to the far end of the prison's fields, to one of the higher gardens. “You'll find a man up there – he's Utaru. A quiet fellow who goes by the name of Eri.”

She thanks him and they part ways, Olin returning to his task as Aloy heads towards the place he pointed out. There's only one guard in the upper area, leaning against the shack where most garden tools are kept and not looking particularly watchful.

The reason for that becomes clear when she notices there's only one prisoner working here, sitting on the ground near the rocky wall. He seems to be talking to the ground, touching the earth with his fingers in a way that is somehow gentle.

Her approach doesn't disturb him, a slight nod in her direction all the acknowledgment he gives her at first before whispering to the ground again. It almost feels like he's performing a ritual, and unwilling to rudely interrupt, Aloy crouches down next to him and waits.

One of her feet is going numb by the time he looks up for a moment, and Aloy stops rubbing her leg to stare back, peering into the man's dark eyes. They look kind, too kind for a man in prison she imagines, but here they are – hunter and prisoner.

“Do you hear them, too?” he asks softly. “The hushed tones of the fallen,” he elaborates upon seeing her no doubt clueless expression. He touches the earth once more and says, “Here, you can feel them, living in the roots.”

“I'm not... I don't think –”

The Utaru closes his eyes, prompting her to stop speaking somehow. “Join me,” he says. “Reach out and feel.”

It's not what she came for, but the urgency of her quest has been pushed to the back of her mind by the man's strangely gentle ways. She touches one hand to the soil, all too aware that she's still talking to a prisoner, someone stuck in Sunstone Rock for a reason even if it isn't clear to her personally.

“Release your fear,” he says – how was he able to tell she was still on edge with his eyes closed? – and spreads out his fingers, shifting the dark grains. “I will not cause you or any other creature harm.”

“I don't know you,” she points out, and he nods.

“Aloy, from Nora lands.” The way he doesn't name her of the Nora doesn't escape her, and she's left wondering how much of her reputation travels along the roads of the Sundom and beyond. “I am Eri, once caged, then liberated. The times of Liberation were times of bloodshed, and my hands were stained. I'll stay here, passing on their memories.”
“Is that what you're doing now?”

He hushes her. “Feel,” he says.

Her hand already touching the damp and cold earth, she follows his example and spreads out her fingers, digging them slightly into the soil. It's just cold to her, the grains slowly warming under her palm. She's aware of the wind rustling the dried stalks of maize behind them, feels it move some of the grains against her fingers, pushing softly.

“You've suffered losses,” Eri says, startling her out of her concentration. “You may leave them here with me. I'll place their seeds into the earth each time of planting and bless their harvests. Their memories will remain, becoming whispers in time, but you do not have to carry them.”

It's an unexpected offer, one that forces her mind back to memories of the Proving foremost. “I – ” she begins to say, but cuts herself off, clearing her throat. “How can you tell?” she asks instead.

This time the man does look up and meet her eyes. “Rare are those who do not carry others’ memories during these times,” he says, “and your story is one told by many people, though there was no need for that. I could see them in the lines of your face. Great happiness and great sadness. Do you see them in your dreams?”

“Sometimes,” she admits. The nightmares have gotten less frequent since spending so much time with Elisabet, and she doesn't wake up from them in the same violent manner as before, but it's still an aspect of her life she prefers to spend little time on.

“Let them rest here,” Eri says, his gaze calming in a way that's hard to describe. She's never quite met someone like him before, and she's not sure how to react. “I hold them for many others, too. Giving them to the jungle's memory so they may live on, no longer following their keepers like shadows.”

“Is that why you're here?” she asks, and he nods once again.

Cupping a hand of soil, he shows her the dark grains, the different sizes and shapes standing out against the soft flesh of his palm even as theirs colors blend into the backdrop.

This isn't what she came for, but his offer appeals to her, though she isn't sure how that would work. She doesn't believe much in spirits or mysticism. “Will it help me sleep better?”

Eri gestures for her to hold up her own hands and gives the grains to her, damp but warmed by his own hand. “Tell us their stories – to me and the sands.”

It's hard in the beginning, her attempts at talking about her fellow participants of the Proving awkward and halted. She starts with the ones she hardly knew – who she only knew by face. The ones that were shot down in front of her when the Eclipse attacked.

She recalls their cries and gasps, the way some of them landed instantly still while others were alive for the duration of the battle, injured beyond recovery and unable to move. One of the young Braves had looked her way when the second wave of attacks came, their eyes meeting across the battlefield before an Eclipse soldier gutted them.

There was hardly time for any of them to prepare and counterattack, not when fighting an ambush of seasoned warriors used to spilling blood indiscriminately.

She speaks of Bast, how while he was never unclear about his distaste towards her, he was willing the give his life in battle – and he did. Then she mentions Vala, one of the first people of the tribe
who she would have liked to call her friend...

Once she starts talking about her, it's hard to stop until she has told every detail. The glances across the table during their shared breakfast, the things she mentioned on the road towards the Proving grounds... How she tried to protect everyone, and how Aloy watched her fall, bullets catching her body in mid-flight.

Her blood stained the snow a deep, dark red.

Aloy has to pause and give herself a moment to breathe, and when she does she notices the wet tracks on her cheeks stinging as a gust of wind passes by. She closes her hands over the soil protectively, keeping them from being blown away.

She's hesitant to look at Eri, but he has his eyes closed, similar tear tracks streaking his face as though they were his companions, too. She finds herself grateful that he isn't looking at her, and at the same time she knows he's listening to her every word and committing them to memory, as he promised.

Next she talks about when the Eclipse invaded Nora lands a second time, the dead Braves she came across on her way to the Embrace. Marea, who died for her people willingly, and then Karst – who despite his at times stand-offish demeanor had been a constant in Aloy's life, ready to trade with her even when she was an outcast because he **understood**, having been there himself.

The last person she mentions is Ourea, and so far it hurts the most to talk about her death. In a way, the Banuk Shaman had reminded her of Elisabet even before Aloy had had the chance to get to know her in the Cradle Facility. Her devotion to the blue light and to CYAN wasn't that different from how Elisabet is with GAIA, and her wisdom – if at times straying from the truths Aloy discovered on her own – had heartened her in the cold wastelands of the Cut as they worked together to stop HEPHAESTUS.

Perhaps, in a different life, Aloy would have found Eri and told him stories of Elisabet as well, but there's no need for that. Not anymore.

Once there are no more words left to speak, Aloy falls silent, her hands still cupping the soil like it is now precious to her. Eri's eyes open and he regards her, neither of them saying anything for the time being.

“Is there anyone left?” he asks softly, and she hesitates, thinking of the one person she doesn't feel she can talk about like this. The one person she isn't willing to let go.

“I can't,” she says. “He's a part of me.”

Eri doesn't push her to say anything else. Instead, he holds out his hands as a cup, ready to receive the soil from her. Now that the time has come she feels attached to the grains of sand, and swallows thickly before opening her hands above Eri's and letting the soil fall down.

Some of it has stuck together from being held for so long and crumbles slightly in the Utaru's hands. Once most of it is gone, Aloy wipes her hands carefully, trying to give Eri as much of the soil as possible, and then Eri closes the cup shape of his hands, holding it close to him.

“They are safe now,” he says, and even if she doesn't fully understand why, it feels like a weight has lifted from her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she mutters. Her hands free once more, she scrubs her cheeks dry and notes how Eri keeps holding the soil instead of releasing it, and somehow that makes her feel better, too. Having finished talking, she finds herself feeling vulnerable and out of her element once more, but the Utaru
seems the same as before they talked, like the stones in a riverbed.

“Why did you come?” he asks, and Aloy's cheeks start to burn at the reminder. The sky's hue is already shifting, that's how long she's sat with him – and she'd hoped to leave the grounds of the prison before nightfall –!

With nothing left to discuss beyond her search, it's easy to find the questions to ask. “Have you heard of a woman called Ilima? I was sent here to deliver a message.”

She lets out a sigh of relief when he admits to having heard of her. “I gave her mother's memories back to the jungle three years back,” he says. “Ilima passed through here not long ago, headed for the Spearshafts.”

_East from Sunstone Rock –_

Aloy does a quick calculation in her head on how long it'll take her to try and find someone headed that way, trying to remember which machines dominate the area most. Bellowbacks and Stalkers is her guess, a deadly combination. Why a handmaiden would travel those areas alone escapes her.

She thanks Eri, heading for the northern edge of the prison’s territory. There’s usually a herd of Striders around in that area, and she’ll need one if she’s to ever catch up to Ilima in the jungle.

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_Gaia Log: 30 December 3041 – recording/prvt/aloy – STATUS: LOCKED_

Aloy: […] and I’m supposed to find this woman, Ilima. Last time anyone saw her she was traveling south. It’ll take me a few days before I can come back.

_Elisabet:_ So long as you’re safe.

[pause]

_Elisabet:_ There’s not much going on here. GAIA and I – we’re still looking for the right key to decipher MINERVA’s logs. I won’t bore you with the details, but it’s...

_Aloy:_ I want to know.

_Elisabet:_ … alright. Um… if you’ve been to the ZD facilities you’ve probably heard of polyphasic entangled waveforms?

_Aloy:_ That was inside Faro’s machines, right?

_Elisabet:_ Yes. Beyond military grade OS security. Anyway, MINERVA was the one to break the Swarm’s code, and GAIA – because every part of the terraforming system is subdivided – doesn’t have full access to MINERVA’s code-breaking things. The gizmo you retrieved for her back in the Cradle-9 facility –

_Aloy:_ The MINERVA override?

_Elisabet:_ Yeah – well not exactly an override, but it unlocked certain aspects of the Spire for GAIA, which is what we’re working with right now. We’re using those tools MINERVA ‘left behind’ to try and figure out how she encrypted her logs. It seems like because she was very knowledgeable about how to unlock things like the Swarm’s off switch, she’s also –
Aloy: – very good at locking things?

Elisabet: Hah, yeah! Who would’ve thought, right?

Aloy: It makes sense.

Elisabet: [cough] So uh, that’s where we’re at. Slowly making progress, a few hours at a time.

Aloy: You’re not still on the Alight, are you?

Elisabet: Oh – no, I’m uh… in town? There’s this tavern – you might be getting some feedback from that actually, sorry.

Aloy: So that’s what I keep hearing.

Elisabet: [laugh] Yeah, sorry about that. There’s a lot of booze going round and one of them started singing a little while ago. The Oseram, right? They’re the drinkers? Because that’s what I’m observing.

Aloy: Who dragged you there? Erend?


Erend: [unintelligible] where? What’re you doing out here when there’s a drink waiting –

Elisabet: Aloy’s here, thought you might want to say hi to her.

Erend: If this is a joke – and I admit, it’s a good effort – but I’m not that drunk.

Aloy: Can he hear me?

Elisabet: [unintelligible] you doorbell. Here, just put this on your fuck– fudging face.

Erend: I can see her! Aloy! Can she hear me?

Elisabet: [laugh] Oh my god. Just assume you can both hear each other!

Aloy: Are you drinking with my mother?

Erend: Aloy! Hey, haha. It’s not what it looks like.

Aloy: What does it look like?

Erend: I don’t know but it’s – I swear it’s not! Not uh… you never mentioned she could fight?

Aloy: I…

Erend: Because she fights? Built like an Oseram and never would have thought it but she’s strong, jus– just like you.

Aloy: … what have you two been doing?

Erend: Nothing! Well, not nothing nothing, there’s been work and drink and talk –
Aloy: And apparently you’ve been fighting with my mother?

Erend: Sparring! A friendly spar, some falling and throwing –

Aloy: *Throwing?*

Erend: [unintelligible] ahh, that was loud. How can it be that loud? Is she actually here?

Elisabet: [laugh] Is she yelling at you? What are you even talking about?

Aloy: If I come back and you’ve injured her –

Erend: She won’t be! I promise!

Aloy: I know where to find you, Erend.

Elisabet: [unintelligible] Hah, okay. I’m back. Erend is looking mildly uncomfortable and flustered, how did you manage that?

Aloy: … no idea. Um. He’s not. Hurting you, right? Or forcing you to do anything?

Elisabet: Oh lord. [laugh] You’re sweet, Aloy. I asked him to train with me a little, you know, so I’ll be able to defend myself… if the need arises and all that.

Aloy: And… the drinking?

Elisabet: Mutual decision. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be.

Aloy: Okay.

Elisabet: You don’t have to worry. He’s a big guy, but I can handle myself, alright? If anything, maybe you should be more worried about him getting some bruises? ’s that a better thought?

Aloy: Much.

Elisabet: I’ll be sure to pull my punches.

[pause]

Elisabet: It’s a…

Aloy: – culture thing.

Elisabet: Yeah. Talk to you later? Whenever you have time, no obligations whatsoever. I know you’ll probably be busy going after this Ilima.

Aloy: I’ll ask GAIA to contact you when I’ve set up camp for the night, probably.

Elisabet: Alright. You be good now. Sleep tight.

Aloy: Goodnight, Elisabet.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

So it's just after midnight but we can all pretend this was posted on the 2nd of May, right? c':

I wrote the better part of this chapter yesterday in a rush. There are some real life issues going on right now (my health isn't the best and I have to find a new place to live) that made it hard for me to write at all, and while I'm glad I managed to finish it I'm not sure this is one of my strongest chapters. Sorry if that's the case! I hope you'll find some enjoyment in it nonetheless and hope it doesn't disappoint.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steel walls and reinforced doors do nothing to cleanse Elisabet’s mind of the gunfire that resonates between her ears. With a cold sheen of sweat clinging to her forehead she breathes deeply, pressing her palms to her eyes. Hiding.

One of their Cradle facilities fell, and it wasn’t even the Swarm’s fault.

It was purely a matter of faulty engineering and rotten luck. As far as she understands, the foundation of the facility wasn’t as secure as it should have been. A combination of nearby fighting and an underground current caused a collapse on the lower levels, destroying most of the main power generator, with damage reported all the way up to the APOLLO classrooms.

A new location has already been acquired and secured in Colorado, but the loss –

Elisabet shudders, a wave of nausea hitting her almost as hard as the first. The fact that only one crew member died during the incident, that everyone got out before the Swarm got to the site, doesn’t do much to quell the insistent whispers that she should have done better.

Most genetic samples were recovered. Most.

A few of the crates are still there, stuck behind a door that won’t open again. The Lightkeeper Protocol material was saved, having been labeled high priority – she can’t help the bitter smile that touches her lips at that – and around eighty percent of the other material, too, but…

But.

It’s the but that gets her, the twenty percent that was meant to help shape the future world. Depending on how well those particular crates are secured, they might survive the dark years until GAIA can finally allow ELEUTHIA to repopulate the earth, but what good will it do?

Alternatively the crates might not be secure and their contents may already be spoiled, which is possibly even more upsetting as it brings about the idea that they could have lost an entire facility’s worth of material before their countdown has even ended.

She isn’t perfect. Like every member of the ZD project she has her doubts – perhaps even more so because she’s supposed to be the head of it all – and when she received the update on the E-9 facility it took more energy than she had to face the team and tell them that they would recover from this.
That it was a setback, but one they were going to overcome.

She managed to keep her cool until she’d retreated to her sleeping quarters, right hand clenched into a fist so tight her short-bitten nails dug into her flesh regardless. Panic and fear jumped for her throat as the door closed behind her, shielding her from the close scrutiny of her peers.

And so she finds herself sitting on the hard floor of her quarters, back against a wall of everything as the thoughts of loss tear through her mind. She chokes on the idea that, in a few years time, there won’t be anything left to lose. It’s a realization that doesn’t seem to ever let go of her completely, not since her briefing with J.C.S. when the future of the world truly left the realms of maybe and became a solid will be.

They have to succeed. Now more than ever, failure is not an option. The other cradles seem stable so far, and in the grand scheme of things a single facility wouldn’t break the system… it would just mean less humans, and perhaps no Lightkeeper protocol – which wouldn’t be that bad, probably.

The look on Patrick’s face though, when she broke the news…

GAIA appears in front of her, a long flowing green cape curling around her form. “The plan did not fail, Elisabet,” she says just as there’s a knock on the door and Elisabet rises to her feet, opening it to reveal Samina on the other side.

Whatever words Samina says are drowned out by white noise, as is her own reply. She can’t even focus on Samina’s face, the individual features blurring together in a way that becomes more and more unsettling as time passes. The rest of her surroundings start to blur as well, the only thing that remains a constant being GAIA herself, now hovering behind Samina.

“This happened a long time ago,” the AI says, and she tries to argue that less than a day ago doesn’t count as a long time, but finds that she can’t say anything as she keeps talking to Samina, everything around her fading until she’s standing in a dome, the sky a purple galaxy.

GAIA is still there, floating just above ground, watching over her patiently until she’s able to word what happened.

“It was a memory,” she says at a halted pace. “This happened… before I left. Before GAIA Prime.”

“Yes.”

“Can you show her to me?”

Without asking who she means, GAIA conjures up an image of Samina Ebadji in perfect detail, more advanced than your standard holo-tech. Elisabet finds herself drawn closer to the image, careful not to touch by accident and ruin her immersion. The only thing it’s missing is –

Life.

The moment the thought occurs, the image of Samina moves, starting a continuous breathing cycle. Smaller details are added too, like blinking and shifting slightly, and what started off as wonder now drifts into a feeling that is both uncanny and filled with such an immense sorrow and longing that Elisabet finds herself at a loss.

The other Alphas appear one by one, just as she remembers them. Patrick with his seriousness edged into his face, Travis carrying a smirk. Margo with her youthful pride in their work. Charles, whose passion she’d always admired, even through the darkest of days.
The only person who doesn’t show up the moment she thinks of them is Ted, and she’s glad. He doesn’t deserve to be remembered in the same way as her team.

There’s a thought to which she already knows the answer, and she can’t bring herself to actually ask if GAIA could bring any of them back, but the sadness radiating from the AI says it all.

“I am sorry, Elisabet,” she says, the figures fading away slowly. “While the available data could create an approximate, I do not feel confident their recreations would be complete.”

It’s better this way, her beautiful team left behind. They deserve their rest, having finished the work on GAIA for her – for everyone – when she had to go. She considers asking GAIA to tell her about their final moments, and there’s a strained feeling on the other side of their bond.

“It’s okay,” she says. “Don’t tell me. I know it’s hard for you too.”

Soft relief bleeds through, although her conjured avatar remains the epitome of calm throughout the entire exchange. “Thank you, Elisabet.”

In the blink of an eye she finds herself next to the Spire again, hands touching the smooth but cold metal. The hum of GAIA’s presence is still there, right beneath the tips of her fingers, and her head feels like it’s slowly trying to split in two.

Resting her forehead against the Spire’s metal only helps so much. “What happened?” she asks in a whisper. “We were looking at data… and then I was there. Why didn’t I realize I was seeing a memory?”

“It was a partial memory,” GAIA answers through her Focus. “Something in our work must have reminded you of it, triggering an attempt to recover the full memory. However, the lack of material to go from may have caused the confusion.”

She has heard of false memories before, knows the human mind can fill in gaps whenever it deems fit, but she isn’t human anymore. What she saw seems awfully real, with the exception of the blurred parts. “Did it really happen? What I saw?”

The tightness in her chest lets up somewhat when GAIA answers with an affirmative. “I have a recording of the event myself and would be able to share it with you at a later time,” the AI says, but there’s a slight hesitation there as well. “Given your current state –”

“It’s fine,” she says quickly. “I know, I should rest first either way, but knowing you have that on file – that’s enough, GAIA.”

She’s about to try and reassure her further when a loud yell draws her attention away from the Spire. The sudden change in light when she looks across the plateau to the Oseram camp makes her blink, the sun much brighter outside the shade of the array.

The Oseram soldier atop the higher cliffs is waving to the others, pointing at something in the distance – a bright shimmer of silver in the air, approaching rapidly. It looks like a small plane or drone…

“Hostile machines detected,” GAIA says through her Focus, her tone taking on a much more urgent note than before, a sense of alertness bleeding through their bond. “Elisabet, get yourself to safety.”

“Already on it,” she breathes, moving down the foot of the Spire as quick as she can without falling. One of the Oseram is headed her way as well, and it takes her a moment to recognize Erend with the helmet covering most of his face.
“With me,” he says, leading her towards the Oseram camp, and she doesn’t hesitate.

Walking past some of the soldiers she spots a gun being hoisted up, one very similar to the designs she saw Petra working on in Free Heap. She expects Erend to tell her to get inside one of the caves or buildings but he bypasses them completely.

He throws half a look over his shoulder to see if she’s still following. “Quickly now,” he says. “Avad will kill me if you’re on the Alight when that thing arrives.”

The last part is mumbled inside his helmet, probably not fully meant for her to hear, but it makes her risk a peak back at the spot in the sky where the glint was last. It makes her freeze in her step, eyes wide and mouth open, the question she wanted to ask Erend forgotten before it even had a chance to be spoken.

There’s a high pitched screech, her enhanced hearing and sight giving her more range than the soldiers – although they already know what they’re up against, their experience outweighing her advantage.

It’s a gigantic metal bird, its wings reflecting the sun’s light in every direction. Lightning crackles beneath them, blue sparks in the shade. It’s a design she recognizes, having gone over it with GAIA herself when discussing AETHER, but she can feel in her gut that this isn’t a harmless entity observing the land from high above. Its movement is one of purpose, its shape modified in ways that have nothing to do with purifying the earth’s atmosphere.

She reaches out to the Spire, her headache the least of her concerns, and what she receives in return is a mental shove, one meant to spring her body back into action. She has to leave.

It’s not enough. She remembers the grainy footage of bombers flying over Horus-class Titans, their cargo barely making a dent in the Swarm’s defenses.

A leather-clad hand wraps around her arm, pulling her out of her stupor. Erend’s face is in front of her, his eyes the only part visible but filled with fire. “Are you with me?” he demands, voice almost overwhelmed by another screech from the incoming machine.

She tries to nod, barely able to produce more than a rough jerk of her head. “Get me out of here,” she whispers as her insides turn to ice.

Erend doesn’t let go, taking her down the wooden stairs with him, and she’s glad for it. Her knees, for all they’re made of metal, are shaking and his grip is what keeps her upright multiple times when she stumbles over the rough plank work of the walkway.

“Breathe, Elisabet,” GAIA reminds her, the calm of her voice overshadowed by the traces of anxiousness that keep bleeding through their bond.

The intake of air rattles inside her lungs as she’s tugged along, her ears pounding. She can’t think, the only thing that matters getting away from the danger, even if this time it isn’t Faro’s tech that’s out to get her.

They’ve made it to the bottom of the rock stairs before there’s a gust of wind traveling along the rock wall and a sudden pull of warmth from the earth, the air filled with particles of energy. Erend’s pace quickens, dragging her further from the edge of the mesa. There’s a howl and a blast behind them, followed by the repetitious sound of an Oseram gun going off.

Her feet burn where they touch the ground as she tries to keep up with Erend, rushing towards the tall grass and the farmlands beyond. A second gun joins the song of violence and she has to keep
herself from looking back.

Instead she tries to keep her eyes on Erend, to catch any passing emotion through the eye holes in his helmet. He’s frowning – those are his men up there – but at the same time appears completely focused.

So intent on watching Erend, she doesn’t notice the galloping hooves on their left until Erend stops, abruptly pulling her behind him, shielding her from the Striders that rush past them. The move turns out unnecessary when they completely ignore them in favor of two slightly smaller shapes in the distance.

“Scrappers,” Erend mutters next to her before making them move along the path to the village again.

They don’t stop, Erend calling out commands to the Carja soldiers he passes, telling them to close the gates and be ready in case the attack comes to them. Elisabet’s head is ringing by the time the elevator’s doors close behind them, and she sags against the wall.

“Almost there,” Erend says, voice sounding hollow and far off. “You’ll be safe in the palace. You’re gonna be okay.”

She wants to argue that there’s no reason to worry about her when his men are up there doing the real fighting, but realizes he would probably much rather be there with them, even if his duty to protect her comes first.

“I can head there myself,” she says, her own voice just as strange. “You don’t have to watch over me. Go back to your men.”

“No, no,” he argues, reaching out to place a hand on her shoulder. It helps ground her in a way she doesn’t mention, feeling more there than she has since spotting the silver bird. “Have to report to the king anyway. Can get you some lunch on the way.”

The idea of food disgusts her, the nerves in her gut leaving no room for anything but the sight of GAIA’s machine decked out for war. “I feel sick,” she says, the explanation as close to the truth as she can get it, and Erend nods in understanding.

“A drink then,” he says, making her laugh, some of the nerves making way for an empty, helpless feeling.

In the end he doesn’t get her anything from the market, their pace too fast to stop for anything. They arrive to find the palace lacking its usual luster. It’s quiet. Turning on her Focus shows the kitchens below running as normal, but the southern entrance is surprisingly… unmanned.

She can spot a few signatures of the guards but there isn’t a row of waiting nobles and farmers heading for the throne. Being too far away to tell, she can’t say for sure if Avad is missing, too, but she almost assumes he is – an assumption proven right when they climb the stairs and hear murmured voices from the Solarium.

Marad is seated on one of the couches, the lines of his face grave, while the dowager queen sits across from him, and between the two of them stands Avad, his back towards Erend and Elisabet as they enter. He spins around when they come closer, eyes wide in surprise and gratitude as they meet with Erend’s first before landing on her.

“Thank you, Erend,” he says, and gives Elisabet a nod. “It is a relief to see you in good health.”

She’s sure he’s being polite, knowing there’s no way her appearance at this moment can be anything
but harrowed. He doesn’t look too good himself, either, dark circles accentuating the thin flesh under
his eyes.

Dowager queen Nasadi actually moves a seat closer to Marad to make way for Elisabet when Erend
leads her over to the couches, and after the things she just saw there isn’t much left in her to feel
impressed or bemused by the turn of events.

A distant screech draws everyone’s attention, eyes moving in the direction of the Spire, and Elisabet
is right there with them. There’s the sound of an explosion echoing before another howl from the
angered machine, and although she can’t see what’s happening, Elisabet flinches.

The warm touch of a soft hand on her own draws her back to the Solarium, the queen giving her a
gentle look. “The Spire will survive,” she says, taking her hand back. “It has seen a great many
darker days.”

She nods, tries to smile, but when she fails she settles for leaning forward and holding her head in her
hands. The pounding never stopped, but GAIA’s presence feels further away than ever.

Knowing GAIA will be safe – knowing the Spire is only a piece of equipment that allows them to
communicate with more ease than the Focus, in a manner more intimate – and knowing that in the
event the array is lost, their work will still be there, hardly seems like a comfort.

She tries to reach out for their bond and finds a vacuum of space instead, an emptiness she wasn’t
aware of before. There isn’t much else she can do besides sending GAIA an old-fashioned message
through her Focus – but anything is better than waiting for the chance to talk to her alone, and she
does.

There’s an instantaneous reply before she has even sent the message as GAIA comes online. “I am
all right, Elisabet.”

Hiding the breath of relief behind her hands, Elisabet closes her eyes, listening intently to GAIA’s
voice.

“The machine’s primary weapon uses electrical blasts, which is why I closed off the connection to
the communications array for the time being. I apologize for worrying you.”

She wants to tell her it’s more than alright, that she should always take care of herself first and
foremost in these kind of situations, but it would take much longer to type that all out using the
Focus’ eye tracking function instead of the IT’S OKAY she settles for.

Someone offers her a glass of wine and she politely refuses, slowly tuning in to the conversation
happening around her.

“– these attacks will only increase,” Marad is saying. “They are drawn to the Spire and Meridian
itself. Need I remind you of our trade routes...”

Erend scoffs, walking from one end of the balcony to the other. He has taken off his helmet, holding
it under his arm. “Defending trade routes from scavengers and the likes is easy, but this wasn’t a
Glinthawk that swooped down by accident to pick away at the Spire.”

“These attacks,” Marad repeats, “are an attempt to break our defenses.”

Even though they’ve only just arrived, Erend seems agitated enough to think he’s been debating the
matter with Marad for several hours. “They’re not,” he grumbles. “We’re just in their way. I’ve heard
the reports from Brightmarket – the machines weren’t trying to destroy the harbor, they were trying
to cross the land towards the Spire, and that Stormbird only had one target.”

There’s a heavy silence in which Elisabet takes the time to look at Marad, the man’s face tight, lips pressed together so hard they’re turning pale. Avad isn’t much better off, picking up a glass of wine himself and nursing it.

Erend paces a bit more, then comes over to the couch Elisabet’s on. She moves over to the side a little, making way for him to sit down.

“’s not Holy Meridian they’re after,” he mutters. “They don’t want the Spire because they think it’ll weaken the Sundom. Same as before. One of those demons wants to use it to do whatever the forge wishes, and we’re a casualty along the way.”

A beat passes before Marad stands to his feet. “Earlier attacks showed clear signs of being –”

“Earlier ones!” Erend yells, slamming his fist on the table with such force Elisabet finds herself flinching again. “But not anymore! It doesn’t fit pattern but none of that matters – how we react is what is important here. My men are out there – Ersa’s men, good people – protecting this city and the Spire. Putting them on trade routes and gates far out to act as palace guards isn’t going to do anything but weaken us. It’s not our place.

“Keep us here or send us to the pit they keep crawling out of. The Vanguard goes at the front of the line.” His last words are spoken directly at Avad, who, while looking more and more ashen, nods and calls over a scribe.

“Write a letter to the ealdormen of the Oseram detailing the attacks along the trade routes to warn them,” he says quietly. “Then write another to Daytower addressed to commander Balahn. Explain the situation and tell him to pull back any eastern troops and send them here.”

“This will be a sign of weakness to our allies,” Marad says with a calm that must be acted out through sheer force of will. “The battle for the Spire will not have faded from their memories, just as the scars from that time still score our fields.”

Avad’s face is void of emotion, his back straight and even. “Then let the shadows show themselves,” he says, “so the light of the Sun can blind them before they strike.”

There’s a tense moment where only looks are exchanged before Marad bows and leaves.

“And stay away,” Erend says once the adviser is out of earshot.

“He questions any course of action out of concern,” Avad says before taking a sip of wine. With Marad gone he is free to take the empty couch on the queen’s other side, and Elisabet sees the fond but tired looks exchanged between the two of them.

“I would rather a thousand men who question me than one who is willing to kill a victim in my name,” he adds, and Nasadi offers him her hand. He bows his head, pressing a kiss to her knuckles in a way that is almost adoring. He leans in even more, his next words clearly not meant to be overheard, but Elisabet hears him thank her for her counsel nonetheless, calling her mother instead of queen.

It seems pretty obvious to her that the dowager queen isn’t Avad’s biological mother, their age difference not nearly big enough, even if it was a child-bride situation, and something about the way he called her mother... having adopted her as such... makes her think of fiery red hair and a longing deep inside of her.
Before she can think about it for too long, GAIA comes on her Focus, bringing the news of the Stormbird being defeated. Not a moment later Erend rises from the couch and walks over to the balcony. “Fighting’s stopped,” he says. “I’ll go back there, see how they did without me.”

“Go in light,” Avad says.

Erend nods his goodbye to all of them, hovering near Elisabet a little longer. “I’ll be around later in the Three Heads, after sundown,” he says. “Come find me. If you want.”

It’s a somewhat unfortunate way to ask her if she’s up for another night of drinking, and, judging from the smiles the royals have on their faces without bothering to hide them, everyone else is aware of it too. “Sure,” she says, giving Erend all the answer he needs to leave with quick strides.

She suppresses the urge to tell Avad to knock it off when she can hear the king snicker quietly, but Nasadi seems to have a similar idea as she murmurs a gentle reprimand and Avad shakes his head, eyes still twinkling when he stands.

“Our gathering grows ever smaller,” he remarks, casting a look in Elisabet’s direction. “While you are still here, would you be opposed to going on a short walk? There are some things I wish to discuss and my legs would be grateful for the exercise.”

Something tells her it won’t just be about her budding friendship with Erend, but she accepts his offer anyway, letting the king lead them down one of the balconies and into the palace below.

Chapter End Notes

9/5/2018: [ON HIATUS UNTIL THE END OF JUNE 2018] I have to move out of my current apartment c': Will be back tho <3
1/8/2018: Back <3

EDIT 13/5/2018: I completely forgot to add this note to the bottom of the chapter. To give a quick life update, my landlord has asked me and my roommates to leave our apartment asap and... as turns out... he legally can. Through some loopholes in contracts we signed in stressful times we have very little rights and even though our landlord isn’t the devil or anything, we do need to move out within the next three months.

I get really stressed over moving, especially since I'm not able to stay in the same city, I have a cat I don't want to live without, etc - so I'm putting the fic on hold for now until all the stuff that accompanies moving places is behind me. I've actually already moved most things into my new living space but have to wait for the help of one of my friends to move my furniture (sometime next month) and living essentials. Until then there are so many things I gotta do before I'll be able to sit down and write again, but I promise as soon as this is behind me (end of June) I'll be back to the normal uploading schedule.
Hey everyone -

So this is much later than I had imagined I'd be uploading again, and I'm not sure I'll be able to get back into the weekly uploads right away. I've handed in the keys to my old apartment last Saturday and although I've been able to settle in a little bit, there are still a lot of things I have to do before I'm able to feel at home. I'm slowly getting back into writing and chapter 49 is at least half-way done, so for any of you out there who were worrying - I'm definitely not giving up on this story <3

Thank you so much to all of you who left kind encouragements and notes for me to read while I was moving. It's been a very stressful period for me and reading your messages always made my day a little better, and inspired me to keep writing.

And of course a huge thank you to burbear and CZGoldEdition for all the encouragements, beta-reading, being a sounding board not only for my writing but for my impatient whining about everything all the time too. I love you guys <3

Maybe most importantly tho, if you're reading this after me not posting for so very long - thank you so very, very much for returning to this story. I sincerely hope you'll continue to read and enjoy it. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sense of loss and unfamiliarity doesn’t leave her as it usually does. Not when Avad takes her down to the gardens, or when he thanks her for joining the council meeting the other day, or when he leads her gently to the balcony’s edge, a warm hand on her elbow keeping her steady.

There are no more distant explosions, a facade of calm returning not long after the Stormbird’s demise. She knows it’s just a facade as well as Avad does – that somewhere out there, a slow escalation in force has been set in motion and bigger machines will keep on coming.

She’s thankful the rest of the palace is as blessedly empty as the entrance upon arrival, servants quick to turn around and leave in a different direction as soon as they see the king’s approach. As out of touch with reality as she is at the moment, it’s this detail that sticks to mind… but she’s too exhausted to pose any questions about it.

Avad has grown silent. He’s watching her, this much she can tell from the edges of her vision. It doesn’t matter. None of it does, not in this… brave new world filled with monsters of her own creation. While she’s aware her actions in no way make her a second Ted Faro, she can feel the same kind of dread wrapping around her insides.

She’s floating at the back of her head, still occupied by what happened before at GAIA Prime. There’s a moment where, in a quick side-glance, she thinks it’s Patrick standing next to her at the balcony, and her heart jumps for her throat. Then the image shifts and she sees it’s Avad – obviously – but those stern eyes filled with quiet concentration, that’s how Patrick used to get, too.
Rubbing a hand across her face, she exhales shakily. *You’re in Meridian,* she repeats to herself.

If this is the after effect of her system trying to deal with a single partial memory, she tries to comprehend how many more there might be and if she should even try to recover them. As far as she knows, the proper pathways to find them haven’t been laid out, making it damn near impossible to *force* herself to remember the memories hiding in the fog of her mind, so even if she tried… she’d need GAIA’s help.

But what would she gain? The other part of her mind keeps going over the events of late, replaying moments again and again for seemingly no other reason than to torment her. The Stormbird flying in with malicious intent, the vacant stare in Aloy’s eyes when she came back from the battle at Brightmarket, the reports of all the violence being spread by machines – this isn’t what she imagined. This isn’t the world she died for. A better tomorrow, not one that will slowly tear itself apart all over again.

“I do hope your troubled thoughts are not caused by my doing,” Avad says after a soft clearing of his throat, and Elisabet leans forward, shaking her head as she holds on to the stone railing.

“’s not your machines out there, killing your men,” she manages to force from her lips.

“Or attacking the Spire,” he adds, and *damn it.* Of course he’d be able to put one and two together. “I imagined as much, although I admit wishing your troubles were of a more trivial sort… perhaps taken shape in a lighthearted scandal of the court.”

She snorts despite it all. “What, Erend and his charmingly awkward mannerisms sprouting rumors of an Oseram seduction surrounding my person? He’s unsure how to address me, not actively trying to flirt with me.”

Avad gives her a smile when she looks at him over her shoulder. “I am aware,” he says. “He is, after all, one of my few close friends. I believe the matter at hand may simply be the fact you are Aloy’s mother, for all intents and purposes.”

The subject feels a bit forced, and she realizes it’s an attempt to distract her. Her mind is still focused on the attacks and memories of warfare, but she takes a slow breath and tries to calm herself the more human way – GAIA said it would help, after all.

“Let me guess,” she says. “He has a crush on Aloy.”

The following silence punctuates how out of time and place she is. The light frown on Avad’s face only adds to it, but the king doesn’t question her choice of words directly. “Yes, he was… quite taken with her after they first met,” he says instead, answering in a way she doesn’t have to try and explain herself.

It must be part of his diplomatic ways and Elisabet is grateful for it. Somehow it makes her feel a little less alien and more like she’s merely a foreign visitor who hasn’t grasped the language quite yet. “Funny,” she says, set on continuing the easy conversation without drifting back to the Spire, “I heard it was *you* who couldn’t keep his eyes off of her.”

There’s surprise in his eyes for a moment before he coughs, looking away. “She is exceptional,” he says, and she can swear there’s the hint of a blush coloring his cheeks before some of his seriousness returns and he turns back to her. “You both are.”

It’s not the first time she’s heard the compliment. The word doesn’t make her flush anymore, sending jitters to her stomach like when she was in her twenties. It’s something that grinds against her skin,
like fingernails dragging down her arm, not harming but causing resistance.

*Exceptional is but a word people use to describe their own feelings in relation to you,* her mind whispers. Not everyone would be able to do what she does, but what they see as exceptional is perseverance to her, and to persist is human.

She’ll fix it, this whole mess. They’ll fix it together even if it kills her again.

Cold settles in the cave of her chest. She presses her thumb to the palm of her hand, nail facing inward in an effort to dispel it. “Nothing to worry about then.” Her tone is flat even to her own ears, her eyes aimed sightless at the treetops. “You’re getting married and he’s too drunk to seduce anyone after work.”

There’s a choked laugh on her left that is finally able to drag her away from the wreckage of her old world and back to the sun-touched balcony. The mirth on the king’s face acts as a reminder, a voice like Travis’ telling her off in a joking but at the same time dead-serious manner, saying sometimes the only reaction to things is to laugh in an attempt to release the immense stress on the human psyche.

The corner of her lips twitches and she imagines her code struggling, unsure which emotion to decide on. “Too uncouth for you?” her mouth says. “No reason to reel in the giggles after Erend asks me out for a drink when we’re coming out of a war meeting, but this takes it one step too far for you?”

Concern fills Avad’s face for a moment, almost like the realization of what his actions looked like to an outsider make him feel a measure of shame for them, and he apologizes. “Not for the company at the time,” he says. “I assumed… without weighing my actions… I acted out in a manner unfitting of a king—”

She waves a hand in his direction, trying to get him to stop before he starts talking about her status as an Old One or whatever else he’s thinking of. “We’re good then,” she says. “Don’t think anyone is around to chastise either of us, and I’m not telling Queen Nasadi if you won’t.”

Her words startle another laugh from Avad, and this time she chuckles too, the sensation foreign in her chest. Fuck, what are they even talking about? None of it matters, none of it. Her head buzzes as she continues to laugh after Avad has stopped. She can’t look at him anymore, her vision blurring to the point of pixel-like white noise.

A mantra of fuck, fuck, fuck fills the space between her ears, echoing louder and louder, drowning out her surroundings. Her knees buckle, sending her body down to the smooth stones of the balcony floor. Everything pulses, the stone supports of the balcony’s railing a cool surface to hold on to, her arm curving around its shape, nails trying to dig into the material.

She’s slipping, the world crumbling like sand through her fingers. All she can see is white and Ted’s face, Ted’s fucking face, apologetic and pained with regret.

God forgive me.

His voice overlays every image that follows – GAIA Prime, her unpacked room, closing the port seal – all of it flashes before her eyes. Steel claws take hold of her, dragging her deeper into the pit of memories, past the Alphas and GAIA, away from Herres’ outstretched hand and grim expression, away from all the voices calling her name in a million different ways.

When the vertigo ends she finds herself at a window, the FAS campus far below. A newscaster murmurs behind her, nonsensical phrases filtering through the white noise… More attacks are
Her fingertips are touching the glass, raindrops suspended on the other side of the window, frozen in time. It takes her a moment before she’s able to turn, taking in the confines of Ted’s office. The hairs at the back of her neck rise when she spots him sitting behind his desk as usual, stylus touching his lips, gaze tracking the newscaster on TV from the corner of his eyes.

There’s something aloof about him in this unmoving state, like he’s taking in what is said on the news but not processing the message. The broadcast is frozen as well, the woman’s mouth opened mid-sentence, an image in the right hand corner showing a Khopesh burned into the screen.

God forgive me.

The papers on his desk are signed, a contract authorizing the creation of his goddamn Peacekeepers. The ink shimmers under the office lights, the oil forever in a state of seeping into the papers’ fiber. Her hand twitches with the urge to smear it, to undo a decision that incites rage in every part of her being.

She doesn’t breathe, the tension inside her chest matching the ache of her clenched jaw. There’s a paper bag on one of his visitor chairs and no need for her to check and see the stunning dress held within. There are glasses of champagne and trampled confetti litters the floor, the scent of sweat and alcohol burning her nostrils.

Please don’t do this, a second voice says, broken, tired and afraid. The room grows colder when she realizes it belongs to her as it joins Ted’s chorus.

It’s like a record playing a twisted selection of best hits in her mind, recapping pivotal moments of her shared experiences with Ted.

“This isn’t real,” she whispers, pinching the soft skin just below her elbow. A memory of pain is triggered somewhere far, far away and she turns around again, trying to pinpoint its location before it fades.

The door leading out of Ted’s office is closed. She doesn’t consider the idea that it might not open until she tries and nothing happens. There’s no sound of anything moving when she holds the handle down, the door itself cold and hard as concrete. For some reason she’s reminded of invisible walls in video games, remembers a time long ago when she spent hours patrolling the edge in one of them, attempting to find an opening.

“No time like the present,” she mutters, placing one hand on the office door, pressing down firmly before moving it along the wall, feeling the texture change slightly underneath her fingertips but nothing else. No unexplained cold spots, no drafts or hollow sounding panels.

When she reaches the window she finds Aloy looking back at her. The short hair and modern clothes are out of place on her in a way that’s difficult to put her finger on before realizing it’s her own reflection she’s looking at – a younger Elisabet. It becomes more clear when they move at the same time, moving closer to each side of the window until it’s impossible to see her reflection anymore, the campus below taking over the view.

The glass of the window is cold and unforgiving, colder than the walls, raindrops still sitting on its surface, unable to continue their slide down. Tapping the glass gives her a different reaction than the walls, the impact of her knuckles sending out small shock waves across its surface.

She has to get out.
There’s hardly any thinking involved before she draws back, creating some distance between herself and the window. The familiar sensation of running through molasses in a dreamscape manifests, slowing her down, but she pushes through until her body hits the glass. The impact is jarring as she comes to a sudden halt. It doesn’t hurt, which, while convenient, is the least of her concerns, and she turns back, setting herself up to try again.

The glass thrums with each attempt, giving hope in a hopeless situation, but it does not give. At least she doesn’t get out of breath either, she notes with a grim smile, resting her forehead against the window. She closes her eyes, drowning out the voices with the darkness of her mind.

GAIA, she thinks, trying as best as she can to project it outward. *Come get me. Please.*

She waits a little longer, hoping there’s no answer because of a delay, something that would make sense… but all that has changed when she opens her eyes is her own voice, saying *let go of me* instead of trying to beg.

Nothing.

Unable to stop herself from casting a glance back at Ted, she finds him in exactly the same place as before. It’s fitting, in a way. He never did seem to care for anyone but himself. A part of her wants to go over to him, to sit down in one of the chairs across from his desk and… stop. There are worse things she could be forced to look at for an eternity, and she’s just so *tired.*

Her next conscious thought stops her from going over to the desk, having taken the first few steps completely unaware.

“Why not?”

It’s her own voice spoken from the mouth of Ted Faro, whose head has turned to face her. His body continues to be unnaturally still but he’s looking at her, eyes taking her in. Disgust roils her stomach when his lips part to speak again. “Give up, it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Oh, shut up,” she replies, and part of her anger at seeing Ted’s face dissipates. Hearing his image speak with her voice breaks much of the illusion. She’s used to dealing with her own doubtful self. If that’s the reason that chair across from him is looking so inviting, it’s suddenly easy to refuse it.

“It’s what you want,” Ted says, her voice soft and convincing. Bargaining. As strange as the combination is, Elisabet has to admit it’s making him come across as more genuine and caring than he ever did in the real world. “You’ve done so much. You can’t do everything – Aloy is out there with GAIA. They’ll do a better job without you anyway.”

She turns her back on Ted and her own insecurities, heading for the window. “You’re right,” she breathes, seeing another figure on the other side of the glass, and determination sparks a flame in her chest. “They are out there, waiting for me.”

GAIA’s long green robe flows through the air outside, her body floating high above the campus. Elisabet still can’t open the connection between their minds, but the fact that she’s *there* is more than enough to try and break through the glass again.

Nothing that comes out of Ted’s mouth deters her from launching herself at the glass with as much force as she can muster. All she sees is GAIA, slowly floating towards the window until she stops right in front of her. The cold starts to pull away from the room and even if GAIA isn’t reacting to her… even if she’s just an image, just like Ted, Elisabet knows that somewhere, out there, the real GAIA *is* waiting for her.
She reaches out to her, not noticing at first how her hand sinks through the glass of the window like it’s made of liquid until she finds a warm arm to grasp on to, a hand wrapping around her elbow and a strong pulse coming from the flesh.

“You’ll die.” The words are spoken with more urgency than before, and looking over her shoulder she finds Ted has risen from his seat. “There’s nothing out there but death and destruction. They’ll destroy themselves and take you with it.”

Elisabet holds onto the warm arm on the other side of the barrier, making eye contact with the conjured image of her insecurities. “So what,” she says. “We’ve been there before. We’ll do it again.”

She’s pulled through the glass and into the Meridian heat. Her vision swims before it settles on Avad’s brown eyes that show gentle concern, his lips parted as if to ask her if she’s okay, but he doesn’t, giving her some space instead without letting go completely.

A light breeze picks up, tousling strands of her hair while making the few wisps that escape Avad’s crown flutter. It takes away some of the burning heat that pulls on her limbs.

“This is real, isn’t it?”

If he’d been sitting a few feet further from her, he might not have been able to hear her question at all, the words coming out so soft they’re swept away by the wind immediately. “As different as it may be from your time of metal and machines, I assure you,” he says, leaning in, “this is real.”

Her thumb rests on the crook of his elbow, the flow of blood in the artery below a steady reminder of the life surrounding them. Noticing their entwined arms, Elisabet is quick to let go of the king, pulling her hand back until it rests in her lap. Her other arm is still clinging to the balcony’s post with a death grip and she releases that too, hand aching from where it clutched at the stone for so long.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I don’t know what came over me just now. I…”

Avad shakes his head slowly, reaching out to gently hold her hands, both of them this time, his fingers turned upward and curving her palms. “You have lived through a war so great not even the Sundom’s wisest philosophers could write a depiction of it that would do its magnitude justice,” he says, lowering his voice. “It is not unheard of for great warriors to suffer from… delusions. To see images of fighting long after the battle has ended. It is not a subject that is spoken of lightly or openly, but I have visited the Sun-Priests myself before with… concerns.”

She resists the urge to tell him she knows, that PTSD is a given at this point even with her artificial body. Instead she bows her head, thanking him.

“I could take you to see them,” he offers. “Perhaps through prayer… the visions may pass. It has helped with some of my own.” The admission at the end is delivered with a measure of care and restraint, making it clear Avad wouldn’t admit to seeing the priests for his own mental health to just anyone.

“I’ll consider it,” she says, knowing she probably won’t.

In a gesture more kind than she feels is warranted, Avad leads her to one of the lower balconies. Their shared silence is broken by voices, specifically one of a young child, and rounding the corner brings to view a silken canopy, the soft pillows beneath it supporting Lady Saranah, Dowager Queen Nasadi, and young Prince Itamen.

A third party is watching over them, one that Elisabet recognizes as Vanasha, her bright clothes
betraying her from the shadows along the wall. Their eyes meet across the balcony, and neither of them moves until Vanasha gives her a slight nod.

Elisabet is quickly invited by the queen to sit with them. She arranges herself on one of the corner pillows, giving the royal members their personal space while still joining them. It takes a while for conversations to pick up again, but after a servant brings them all refreshments Itamen seems to forget she’s there entirely and returns to showing a wooden figurine to Saranah. The antlers are reminiscent of a deer’s, but far more likely to represent those of a Grazer.

There’s something about that image, to see a child holding up a symbol like that with such enthusiasm, telling an adult about the strength of the machine and all the things it can do… Saranah responds much the same way Elisabet would herself, giving the boy a smile and listening patiently.

While none of them sitting beneath the canopy are in anyway members of the normal public, the scene is so ordinary, the actions and repetitions bordering the mundane, and Elisabet finds her heart aching from the familiarity. It all plays out in such a gentle manner, as if they’re safe in the shade and the violence in the world doesn’t matter.

Saranah gestures at Itamen to hand over his toy and he does, still rattling off the useful components that can be harvested from a Grazer and pointing at the wooden bits that are supposed to represent them.

The rest of them are silent, and when her eyes aren’t captivated by the gentle moment of childhood in front of her, Elisabet catches the others in her periphery. Avad’s brows are pinched, one of his hands holding on to the edge of a cushion. Queen Nasadi reaches out to him, offering a soft touch on his wrist and a few whispered words that make him look away, and the next time Itamen turns around the king is all smiles again.

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The sense there’s something off around the palace persists, the servants quieter than normal, the court seeing less visitors.

It isn’t something Elisabet minds, but it does throw her off a little. Udina hasn’t been checking up on her as often, and a return to her room reveals the bed the way Elisabet made it in the morning – not exactly up to the palace’s standards. She’d left early, thinking she might’ve been up before Udina’s arrival, but now she gets the impression the handmaid might have been running late, herself.

All that’s changed in her room are the opened shutters and a small bundle of neatly folded clothes left on the table. It’s a clean blue tunic, similar to the one she’s wearing now but missing a lot of the dirt and grime.

Untying her sandals, Elisabet notices the dried mud on her legs despite having worn training armor while practicing with Erend. Their quick escape from the Alight wouldn’t have helped, either. She changes into the clean clothes, brushing off the mud from her skin and sandals as best she can before reaching for the guest room’s wardrobe, a wooden closet that only contains cloaks meant to be worn at night, their material light and capable of trapping any body heat held within.

Elisabet takes one of them – a deep blue color, one that will blend in with the shadows – before creeping out of the guest room.

The streets of Meridian, for all their daytime clamor and affairs, are desolate. The sandstone bricks used for most buildings carry the orange glow of torchlight along their faces, while higher above the moon illuminates the copper rooftops with white.
The Three Heads is located at the edge of the plateau, voices from inside audible a block away. Elisabet has visited before. It’s not her usual scene – as if there’s anything left she can call that – but as she draws nearer, there’s an anticipation building inside of her. A yearning for those voices to fill her head and distract her.

She enters the tavern, letting the cloak’s hood fall from her crown to her shoulders, and breathes in the Oseram workers, the Vanguardsmen and Carja soldiers, the artisans – all clustered at different tables but enjoying the same atmosphere. Ale passes freely among these folks as a two man band in the corner plays a constant stream of music.

The center table is occupied by mostly Oseram, Erend one of the louder members of the company. He rises to his feet, holding out both arms in her direction. “Join us!” he calls out above the crowd. “Huld was telling us about the time he thought he beat a Strider empty handed!”

The Vanguardsman on Erend’s right scowls, hitting Erend’s shoulder in a playful manner. “Not thought – I know I did.”

There’s some shuffling at the table as the men make way for her, and she sits down next to Erend, finding a fresh mug of ale set in front of her immediately.

Their company is loud and distracting, leaving little time for Elisabet to withdraw into the darker crevices of her mind while still allowing her to relax. After joining Erend the day before, the others have quickly come to know her, and their conversations no longer carry the strain of a stranger listening in on them.

The Freebooters are to the point – lewd at times, and at others earnest to a fault. Maybe it’s because Erend is there too, in his own endearingly awkward way, that Elisabet feels at ease. He doesn’t ask her to disclose anything and neither do his companions, but at the same time he keeps making sure she’s a part of their group – like dropping comments related to their training sessions before diving into a story of one of the Freebooters’ first assignments with the company.

She drinks, she laughs, she snorts and hides half her face in the palm of her hand when Huld manages to knock over three mugs in a single uncoordinated sweep of his arm.

It makes the loneliness when she returns to the palace’s guest room so much starker in contrast.

Undressing is a mechanical transition, her body knowing every required movement deep in its circuitry. The tunic she wears at night feels like a formality, the bed a comfort meant to distract her from everything…

Everything.

She sits on the bed’s edge, her hands resting on the mattress. She feels so, so alone – even though she’s been surrounded by people constantly, people who care for her well-being because of reasons she can hardly understand.

Maybe it’s the fact they care that makes her experience that loneliness in the first place. In a way, Erend and his friends, Avad and his family – they remind Elisabet of before more so than Aloy does. Aloy is hers, her offspring, all that’s left of her biological family, but the others…

God, they shouldn’t get involved with her, with all the misery she carries from a time deep in this world’s past. They shouldn’t pick her.

She breathes, the artificial act showing no signs of her inner distress. She curves her fingers, grasping the bed linens in a way that expresses desperation, but only because she actively shapes the gesture
like that.

It’s still good.

It’s real.

A quick check on her Focus reveals the time being past midnight and a lack of communication from GAIA that… stings. Elisabet knows she’s supposed to lean more on the humans for emotional support in order to *anchor* herself, but…

She reaches out and tries to find GAIA’s mind, finding nothing instead. It’s like GAIA is ignoring her on purpose, and it’s not something she’s ever done before. Elisabet tries again, projecting her thoughts, her feelings, but everything stays the same.

In a wry moment, Elisabet wonders if GAIA even *read* her transmissions, and if this is what it would be like if they were both human. Waiting to see the check marks turn blue on each line sent.

Just before settling down for the night, she sends a message through her Focus saying *I hope you’re okay*.

Less than a second later, she receives a reply.

FROM: GAIA
TO: Elisabet Sobeck
SUBJECT: (no subject)

What is your location? Are you unharmed? Please respond.

Chapter End Notes

(so... not sure when the next update will be, but if I don't get it done in time for next week, I'm aiming for somewhere around the 15th)
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

Only a little later than planned, here’s the next chapter! I’m still working on answering all the comments left while I was moving - some of them over a hundred days old, gosh c’: - but I’m slowly getting there! Again, thank you to everyone who commented during my absence and everyone who is still here for the ride. <3

As always, me me big love burbear for beta reading the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Please respond.

There’s no hesitation – not even a moment of deliberation – before Elisabet uses her Focus to call GAIA. “I’m right here,” she says, “in the palace, in the guest room – are you okay?”

Silence, a complete and utter absence of sound before a single word is spoken. “Elisabet.”

Her mechanical heart hammers out a drumbeat, her posture sagging with relief as an invisible weight lifts from her shoulders. In her impatience, Elisabet reaches for their bond again without reward, but at least they’re talking.

“I am unable to locate you,” GAIA says, and this time Elisabet is able to identify the strain in her voice as concern and worry. “The coordinates of your Focus device correspond with the location you provided, however I am unable to find your personal signature. Are you all right? Were you harmed during the attack?”

To hear her speak so hurriedly, the last of her words nearly running together in haste, is so unlike the GAIA she’s used to.

“I’m okay, I’m fine,” Elisabet answers as she tries to figure out what might have happened. The realization that the radio silence wasn’t intentional on GAIA’s end zings through her system, the joy she feels over that fact beneath everything else almost seeming inappropriate.

It could be corrupted data. Components fried in a power surge brought about by the Stormbird, a bug in her code – there are so many possibilities, most of them not good.

“I lost the signal of your Focus device earlier,” GAIA is saying, breaking Elisabet’s concentration.

She rises to her feet, grabbing the dark cloak from where she discarded it earlier and wrapping it around her body. “I’m on my way. Let’s keep the line open, but we’re going to figure this out, alright?”

“Elisabet, it is very late –”

“Don’t.”

Her feet have already carried her to the thick wooden door of the guest room, her hand ready to push it open. There’s a vague notion that her feet are bare, the tunic she’s wearing not suitable for this time
of night, but she isn’t human – not completely. The cold won’t make her any more vulnerable than it would a Strider.

As for sleep – she’ll be able to rest once this is behind them. There’s no way she’ll feel safe closing her eyes knowing GAIA might not be able to contact her. It’s been less than twenty four hours since her last rest. She’ll be good to go for a while still.

She leans her head against the door, breathing in slowly, picking her words with care. “I have to do this now, GAIA. I can’t sit here and wait, not when I can’t… when you’re out there, unable to…” She chokes, vocal synthesizer unable to get all the words out, but in the short silence that follows – even though she can’t feel it – she hears GAIA’s understanding.

“I am here, Elisabet,” GAIA answers.

It’s all she needs to hear in order to set her body in motion again.

The palace is deserted, the few soldiers on guard easy enough to avoid using their thermal signatures and the ones she has no choice but to walk past – the ones on the bridge – ignore her. She wouldn’t have stopped for them, anyway.

Elisabet keeps playing out the route she’s taking to the Spire in her mind, every upcoming turn predicted, every hole in the road accounted for. GAIA is still with her, a silent companion as she travels under the moon’s calming light.

A breeze rushes through the undergrowth, whispering softly as fireflies dance through the air. There are blue lights in the distance, watchful machine eyes. It’s hard to tell from so far away, but Elisabet feels certain they belong to the small herd of Striders she keeps encountering.

The few Vanguardsmen that are still up and patrolling are keeping their eyes out for machines, positioned on the buildings atop the Alight. It isn’t hard to slip past them, and just like every other time she’s visited, they seem hesitant to go anywhere near the Spire physically. It’s convenient, and Elisabet approaches the array from the side, sticking close to the bushes.

It’s hard to see if the array has suffered any damage from the earlier attack. Even though her vision is enhanced, Elisabet struggles to assess more than a few small pieces of the structure at a time. She cranes her neck as she looks for superficial marks higher up, but her patience is running low.

She climbs the foot of the Spire, making sure she’ll remain out of the Oserams’ sight by approaching it from the back. Her feet slip on the rocks a few times in her haste, but once she’s gained her bearings she slams her palm to the array’s metal. She waits for that familiar hum of energy to flow through her, for GAIA’s presence to announce itself –

Nothing.

Her jaw clenches shut and she drops her forehead to the cold and unforgiving surface of the protective plating. “Come on,” she grinds out. “I’m right here, come on, come on, fuck –”

The world shifts. Elisabet stumbles on her feet as she falls into the Spire and into GAIA’s open arms. A pulse of blue energy flashes across the sphere’s surface that holds back the infinite galaxy surrounding them, but all Elisabet is paying attention to is GAIA’s face, her eyes drinking her in like she’s the end and beginning of all things.

Memories flood her mind as much as her own bleed out, the past half day of their shared experiences mingling together. The signature of the Stormbird dying out while Elisabet is sitting in the Solarium with the king – the silence from both ends, Elisabet’s mental calls going unanswered while GAIA
was unable to find a trace of her – all the different outcome scenarios GAIA started predicting right at that moment –

“You’re safe,” they say, speaking at the same time.

Maybe Elisabet would have been able to chuckle at that in any other given situation, but right now it’s laced with too much need and desperation, worry and fear and relief. She wraps her arms around GAIA’s torso, bringing her hands up to grasp at her back and shoulders, pressing her closed eyes to GAIA’s neck as the embrace is returned.

All her insecurities are laid bare once more while their connection deepens. She can’t even deny the embarrassment she feels at their intensity, because here she is, held in the arms of a being so powerful and kind and loving, still fearing she’ll one day be cast aside for her flaws.

It’s irrational, the furthest thing from the truth, but the thought still persists with a stubbornness that can only be called Sobeck fire.

Elisabet draws back, looking at GAIA in wonder – the description didn’t come from herself – and finds a soft smile drawn on the AI’s lips.

“It’s your strength and your weakness,” GAIA explains, and… yeah. Elisabet can see it. The way GAIA says it isn’t a reprimand either. It’s just a truth, and the only thing she feels in reaction to that truth is love.

She tries to return a smile of her own but can hardly manage to pull one corner up, let alone force the full movement. “Humans and their pesky self-doubts.”

A wave of cold pulls her into the recorded memory of earlier – the fabricated setting of Ted’s office – but this time, GAIA is right there with her, never breaking their embrace. The memory plays out, the recorded version of Elisabet going through all the motions, and she’s able to relive the echo of her feelings.

At the end of the scene, when her past-self says, we’ve been there before, we’ll do it again, worry flows through their bond and GAIA reaches for her face with one hand, gently cupping her jaw as the scene resets.

“Elisabet.” Her expression changes, shifts from ethereal serenity to something much more human, her brows pinched and the corners of her mouth pulled back. GAIA’s thumb strokes her cheek. “I will do anything in my power to stop this world from taking you before your time.”

And god, she means it.

Elisabet finds her chest aching with simulated breathlessness as she blinks at GAIA. “I don’t know what to say to that,” she confesses. GAIA has already brought her back once, a feat unlike any other. The thought of GAIA resurrecting her a third time crosses her mind, leaving a sense of helplessness in its wake. “It won’t be me, if you upload my memories into another body. Not really.”

GAIA shifts, her other hand cupping the other side of Elisabet’s face. “I won’t let it come to that,” she says. “I am able to run predictions on outcomes with great precision, I’ll stop events that lead directly to your demise before it’s too late.”

No.

Her hands no longer clutch at GAIA’s back. They come down until they hang by her sides, and Elisabet watches confusion take shape in her eyes. Elisabet shakes her head, then turns to kiss the
palm of GAIA’s hand.

“At the cost of what, GAIA?” she asks. “Last time, I sealed that door because it had to be done. I was the one who had to do it, and if I hadn’t…”

A deep and vast ocean of dark blue washes over her through their bond, an overwhelming sense of being alone and lost in a world so far beyond all previous experiences crossing their minds. Not much changes in GAIA’s face, but Elisabet can tell her feelings of grief are as much a memory from before as they are echoed now at the realization of Elisabet’s refusal.

“I’m so sorry,” Elisabet whispers. She mirrors GAIA’s gesture, holds her face in her hands. “I don’t want you to buy me more borrowed time. If it’s me or the world, me or Aloy… me or you… let it be me. You’ve already given me so much.”

The galaxy around them shifts, the purple hues changing to deeper reds until everything fades and the stars blink out of existence. The void that remains lies silent around them until, in a far distant spot of dark emptiness, a blue light is born, softly reviving the universe with its touch.

“I understand.” GAIA’s voice is soft, carrying a note of vulnerability Elisabet wouldn’t be able to hear outside of their connection. As much as Elisabet is unable to hide from GAIA, the reverse applies, too.

GAIA is afraid of a world without her in it – terrified in her own way of facing eternity alone – but her love outweighs that fear by a staggering amount, and it’s her love that leads her to understand Elisabet’s wishes.

“Is that why you hid your signature?” GAIA asks, and although the subsequent confusion on Elisabet’s end is likely an answer in and of itself, Elisabet steps back, frowning.

“That was my doing?”

“If you are unaware of this, then it must have happened while you were experiencing emotional distress,” GAIA amends.

I cut you out?

A feeling of compassion washes over her own troubled thoughts at the realization that follows – that the thing blocking her from GAIA was something she did to herself. She’s unable to look into her own code – which is probably for the best – but right now, Elisabet wants nothing more than to dive in and figure out where it all went wrong. What changed during her episode.

“Fix it,” she says as she recalls the warped version of Ted’s office. “I shouldn’t be able to do that unaware. Make sure I don’t do it again, it’s a liability.”

There’s surprise from GAIA’s side of the bond, and the AI holds out her hands to Elisabet. “It’s all right, Elisabet. We figured it out. I can find your signal once more.”

She reaches for GAIA’s hands, allowing the touch to comfort her. “There’s no knowing when it’ll happen again if you don’t…”

GAIA shakes her head. “I won’t risk it. We can look at it when you’re inside a facility – a controlled environment, not out here in the open.”

It’s not what she wants – but it’s for the best, and Elisabet concedes. Stubborn is a word that flows across their bond, followed by wonderfully so. GAIA raises one of their joined hands and Elisabet
follows her lead, twirling beneath it and turning into the soft embrace the AI offers. One arm wraps around her front, holding her close.

She hasn’t been held like this for a long time, shielded in someone else’s arms. Her mind drifts to before, to racing heartbeats and tentative firsts, to different partners and moments.

GAIA raises her hands once more, pressing her lips to Elisabet’s knuckles. There’s no physical sensation, but the gesture itself is –

“– so very human of you,” Elisabet says, finishing the thought out loud, and she catches a smile on GAIA’s face. “When did you learn to do that, huh?”

A hint of smugness crosses their bond. “I have closely observed many human customs,” she says, “although I rarely find it appropriate to use them myself. The lack of a physical form contributes to this.”

Maybe one day.

“Perhaps,” GAIA adds. “However, we are getting sidetracked. Your emotional state, earlier…”

“Right.”

Ted’s office materializes around them a second time, and GAIA sets about composing a list of every item there linked to a different memory, sorting them by date. There are more of them than Elisabet had initially noticed – like her old glasses on a shelf – but all of them are in some way related to Ted and FAS, it seems.

GAIA takes note of her observation. “Were you attempting to view partial memories?”

She shakes her head, half distracted by her glasses being there and remembering how Ted kept insisting she get rid of them. “No, I don’t… I don’t think I was. Avad and I were talking about… nothing in particular, just small-talk, and everything felt so… so…”

Meaningless. Lost. That split second where the world shifted beneath her feet and she slipped into the jumbled mess of her mind.

The words incomplete data attempted defragmentation drift between them as Elisabet catches onto a tail of GAIA’s thoughts. She frowns, letting the data flow away.

“I was doing that while being unaware of it?” she asks, and feels GAIA’s agreement.

“You are running a multitude of programs unaware,” GAIA answers. “It was necessary to lock your stream of consciousness out of those processes.”

It isn’t really new information, but it’s good to be reminded. Apparently her code is as stubborn as she is, trying to repair her memories against all odds.

“Can you stop me from doing that?”

GAIA’s brows crease. “Not through this connection. There are too many risks involved.” Her expression freezes for a split second. There’s concern on her side of their bond and her voice is laced with that same concern when she says, “Elisabet.”

The next moment GAIA shoves her away with both hands, pushing her out of their shared mindscape.
Watch out.

The deep hues of the galaxy disappear in a flash of blue light. They’re replaced by darkness illuminated by far off stars and a sudden pressure around Elisabet’s throat.

The momentum of GAIA’s push sends both Elisabet and her unknown assailant down the slope of the Spire’s foot. There’s a yelp when, while falling, Elisabet grabs the arm holding on to her neck and flings it off. They tumble, no longer attached to each other, and when they reach the bottom of the slope they land mere feet from each other.

Elisabet pushes herself up. It only takes the slightest glimmer of moonlight on steel for her to reach for the incoming hands and stop them. That’s when she fully registers the knife and the identity of the woman fighting her.

“What the fuck,” she snaps before Vanasha raises an unrestrained foot and kicks her straight in the stomach with the intent to send her to the ground, but instead of knocking any breath out of her, Elisabet only stumbles slightly, releasing the knife-less hand.

Time slows and Elisabet’s perception increases, the delay making it possible to see Vanasha going for the knife with her free hand and intercept that movement, taking hold of her wrist and twisting it away from their bodies.

As enthralled as she is with her newfound ability to slow down time, apparently, Elisabet doesn’t notice the leg sweep until it quite literally hits her. She holds on to Vanasha, letting them both fall and roll.

Elisabet lands on her back, Vanasha half straddling her with the knife still in the firm clutch of her fist when time resumes at a normal speed and the woman crumbles on top of her with another yell. Vanasha lets go of the knife in favor of ripping a Focus device from her temple and Elisabet makes use of the temporary chaos to shove her off and go after the weapon.

Elisabet manages to kick it into the bushes before a hand wraps around her ankle. She watches the woman struggle to crawl towards her and only then notices the incessant high pitched noise coming from her discarded Focus.

Stop that, GAIA, she projects, and although there’s a sense of dissent coming from her end, the Focus’ broadcast ceases. Almost like an aftereffect, she finds herself being tackled again, this time Vanasha’s arm wrapping back around her throat and squeezing.

If only there was any blood- or airflow there to effectively cut off.

Maybe, if she were still fully human, this would have scared her, but now the result is only mild irritation at the unprovoked attack. For the most part, she’s confused – and with not much better to do she relaxes, willing to wait for Vanasha to tire of her continued efforts or for Elisabet’s patience to run out. Whichever comes first.

There’s a grunt in her ear and the arm under her chin jostles, shifting as Vanasha tries to get a better lock on her.

It’s taking too long.

“You know,” she says, voice only slightly pinched because of the added pressure on her throat, “if you’d stop trying to kill me for a few minutes, I bet we can talk things out. I’m not sure what you think I’ve done to break that contract we had about you not murdering me in my sleep, but…”
She can feel the release of small breaths against the shell of her ear. “What are you?” Vanasha’s voice remains mostly controlled, the undercurrent of frustration only bleeding through because she’s clearly losing energy and not getting anywhere in return. “You’re not human. Don’t bother trying to deny it.”

“Okay. You’re right.”

While she can’t see Vanasha’s reaction, she can tell by the sharp intake of air next to her that wasn’t the response she expected to get out of her.

“I mean, more accurately, I’m only partially human,” Elisabet adds. There’s some slack in Vanasha’s grip and even though she could probably break free easily with her added strength, she settles for tapping the woman’s forearm lightly. “I’m willing to explain it all to you, if you’d just stop with the attempted murdering.”

There’s a hesitant pause before the arm lets up and she’s shoved away, Vanasha already back on her feet by the time Elisabet manages to sit. It’s only now that she can properly observe her, the dark cloth of her attire making her blend in with their nightly surroundings. She’s gotten rid of any colorful accents and even her face, the area around her eyes, is covered in soot.

“I was trying to restrain you,” Vanasha says after they stare at each other, unmoving.

Elisabet holds back on her immediate reaction, which is to laugh, because really? “You were going to restrain me with a knife.”

“After you attacked me.”

Raising a hand to rub at her throat, Elisabet notes the lingering tenderness. Nothing has been damaged in their physical exchange, but that doesn’t erase the knowledge her body seems to keep of Vanasha’s choke hold.

It won’t help arguing who attacked first. She sighs, letting her hand drop. Getting another round of explaining to do after everything else that happened during the day is less than ideal, and a part of her is just exhausted. “What do you want to know?” she asks.

“What you are,” Vanasha answers. “What you were doing out here at night that couldn’t be done during your daily visits.”

Both answers require a lot of foreknowledge, and there’s another impending headache in Elisabet’s nearby future. “What do you think I am?” she tries, hoping it’ll give her an easier out if she can just agree to whatever Vanasha says, but it’s a strategy that is set up to fail with her.

“I don’t think so,” Vanasha says, eyes squinted. “You don’t get to use my words in your answers. Explain before I change my mind – and next time, it won’t be a choke hold.”

Elisabet huffs out a breath, shaking her head at the thinly veiled threats. “And here I thought you were starting to like me.”

Her comment receives no reaction from Vanasha except her already pointed stare. Right. No more stalling.

“I’m an Old One,” she says. “Or, my mind is. My body is more similar to a machine’s.”

“And Aloy?” Vanasha’s back is a stiff line, betraying no reactions to her answer. “Is she aware?”
Somehow her reflex to inquire after Aloy first makes Elisabet feel a warped fondness for the woman. For all her distrust of Elisabet, Vanasha does seem to genuinely care for Aloy… in her own way. A way Elisabet doesn’t entirely approve of, with all the missions and secrecy, the fighting and danger.

She’d like to talk to Vanasha about that, actually.

For now she shakes her head at the thought of even attempting to hide her true nature from Aloy – the impossibility of it all, considering the circumstances of her return – and says, “Of course she does. She was right there when I woke up.”

“Show me proof.”

That’s – not a terrible idea, actually. While it would be far easier to have Aloy by her side to confirm everything she says, there are more ways to show Vanasha what she wants to know.

Finding Vanasha’s Focus device isn’t hard, its signature showing up bright as day on the ground not far from them.

“All right,” Elisabet says, raising her hands. “I’m going to get up and show you. Just… don’t tackle me. Again.”

Under Vanasha’s wary eye she stands and heads over to the Focus device, picking it up and dusting it off before carefully holding it out to the other woman. Vanasha doesn’t move.

“It’s not going to malfunction like before, and it’s the only way I can show you sufficient proof.”

With something akin to reluctance, Vanasha takes the device from her and attaches it to her temple, hiding it behind her shawl.

Elisabet gives GAIA the cue to sync their Focuses before reaching for a recording made just under two months ago. The hologram mesh appears in front of them, showing two figures – one of them in a state of undress.

“It’s okay, you can look,” her double image says, the words coming out in a metallic pitch. “I’m about as graphic as you’d expect for a regular servitor bot.”

Glancing to her side, she finds Vanasha captivated by the holo recording.

Aloy’s voice draws her back in, too. “What happened? I mean, does it bother you?”

How she misses her, this wonderful young person who has come to mean so much to her in so little time. The holo shows how far they’ve come – it shows the distance they held between themselves back then, even if they were both intrigued by the other.

Her eyes shift to her double image, the holo figure holding the Nora dress in front of her, gaze distant. Her body not being fully human… in some ways it did bother her, but she’d never have admitted that to Aloy, and certainly not when they were still getting to know each other.

She watches herself deny any discomforts to Aloy. “To be alive is a gift.”

Stopping the recording there, Elisabet reaches for a different one to follow up – their second meeting. Still, she isn’t quite prepared for the way Aloy says, I found your body, plain and emotionless, like stating a hard fact.

“I know.”
“You were dead for a long time. You can’t be alive.”

“I didn’t think I would be, either.”

“Then how? Explain it to me so I can understand.”

God, those first few conversations… the missteps, the walking on eggshells… the weight of her own mind barely being able to function. Knowing now how fragile the line between her memories and full blown unintentional self sabotage is, she’s grateful for the amount of time GAIA insisted on her to spend with Aloy alone.

She zones out for most of her own explaining, ending the recording at, *I still think the way I did before all this happened.*

Well. She hopes she’s right about that, even if it won’t make a difference for who she is now.

Queuing up the few instances where Elisabet has overridden a machine with her bare hands (and the command she’s able to give, the signal that marks her as their creator), she notes that part of making Vanasha understand will have to be showing her what it was like *before.*

Elisabet reaches for sweltering heat and the scent of hot asphalt. The image of Carson High’s parking lot pops up like a perfect copy.

It’s mid-October 2049 and she’s been invited as a speaker, having founded Miriam Tech just a few months earlier.

Instead of being shown as a hologram, the memory is played like a video, the first person point of view matching that of a Focus recording, showing her hands when she looks down at a slight off-center angle.

The sun beat down on the roof of the car next to her, and Sean – god, she’d forgotten how much gray there was in his hair already at that point – is waiting for her, the look on his face showing she *shouldn’t* be.

“C’mon, they’re waiting for you.”

Her hands come into view once more and she’s been picking at her cuticles. She stops the moment she sees it, rubbing her hands instead. “All eyes on me, nothing to worry about,” her past self says. “Just the impressionable youths of my hometown and my former boss to judge me.”

There’s a distortion in the image before the focus is back on Sean giving her a patient smile. “I’m only here for the free drinks, Elisabet. Now you get in there and shine.”

Both image and audio experience some more distortion when her past self taps into her Focus, the menu showing notes for her presentation. She looks through them as they come closer to the main entrance, the sand colored walls of the building painfully familiar.

“They’re gonna ask about him,” she says, looking over at Sean to find him locking eyes with her. “No way they’re gonna let all the drama slide. He’s been making a spectacle out of every minute of this thing.”

Sean’s face turns stern. “Don’t let it get to you. He’s stirring the pot because he lost one of his best assets and everyone knows it. It’s only because his name is Ted Faro that anyone’s paying attention to his tantrums.”
God.

Ted.

Her control slips for just a second, a moment wherein she instinctively reaches for a different memory – a recording where a hologram of Ted is bowed over the long table in his re-designed office, and –

“There’s a glitch in the Chariot line.”

It’s his fucking voice that does it, that nearly pulls her all the way into herself, but she rips herself back, physically stumbles over her own feet but remains standing. Different images flash in front of her before she can put a stop to them, and she tries grounding herself by reaching out to GAIA as well.

The link to Vanasha’s Focus device is severed and Ted’s face disappears as GAIA embraces her mind with a gentle push. The world is drowned out by a veil like water, muting all other input while Elisabet recollects herself. It doesn’t take long but it makes all the difference when she finds Vanasha staring at her, questions burning behind her dark eyes.

Although not knowing for sure how much was broadcast to her as well, Elisabet can imagine the things she might want to ask, and in a moment of honesty towards herself she knows she isn’t up for the task. Talking about Ted is only marginally different from actively recalling full-fledged memories of him.

I can do it.

GAIA’s soft touch across their bond soothes her. “You do not need to recall anything more, Elisabet,” she says. “I can talk to Vanasha and show her the answers.”

“No, I’m the one who should – she isn’t even aware of your existence –”

“No,” GAIA cuts her off, though not sounding harsh or unkind, “you’re speaking out loud.”

Whatever else she was going to say fizzles out like a flame deprived of oxygen. Glancing over at Vanasha confirms that she was, the raised eyebrow saying more than words could convey in a single action.

Well, fuck.

“So you are talking to the spirit within the Spire,” Vanasha says, sauntering towards her, “and there is indeed a spirit there. Mind telling me what they want?”

There’s a glint in Vanasha’s eyes that show her how quickly the situation can turn violent again, and Elisabet’s too tired to deal with any of this. “You know what?” she says, pointing one hand at the Spire. “Go right ahead. Ask her.”

She watches GAIA establish a connection and Vanasha turns in the Spire’s direction, eyes wide. Is she making the right choice here, allowing the two to speak? Maybe not, but the direct outcome – not having to answer any more questions for now – is worth it in the short term.

Elisabet sits, pulling her knees up and resting her elbows on them. She could check in on what GAIA and Vanasha are talking about, but she’s too tired to listen to anything more. She retreats into herself again, letting the waters rush over her mind.
So much has happened – not just today, but since she woke up. So many realizations and discoveries, wonderful and horrifying alike, and there’s still so much left to do.

While Vanasha asks GAIA about the world they live in, the whispers of an idea enter Elisabet’s mind. Sometimes it seems like all that’s needed is for the right question to be asked, or for someone to reach out…

Wait…

That’s it.

It’s a possible solution to a puzzle – to figuring out how to find MINERVA – and it might not work but what if it does? What if that’s all that’s needed?

GAIA answers her push against their bond without delay, being able to multitask flawlessly.

What if we’ve been going about this the wrong way? Elisabet says, trying to show her idea through thought. It’s a little jumbled, problem and solution bleeding together even as she tries to keep the order coherent, but GAIA seems to get the gist of it anyway. We’ve been trying to force our way in, but what if we send out a signal instead?

Chapter End Notes

Next up: what Aloy has been doing!
Hey everyone <3

Here's a super late chapter. Today has been the first day in a long month where i haven't had to work on the house at all (and i still did some work lmao, couldn't sit still) but I finally pushed through and wrote 1500 words. Things are finally improving here, both physically and mentally (the house being in better shape absolutely adds to that).

I'm nervous about posting again because i'm not back to full speed and i still have so many of you to reply to, but i'll do my best while still taking the time to rest up.

as always my love to burbear <3 (no link today because it's almost midnight and i'm tired zzzzz)

A ceiling of colorful leaves hides Aloy from the sun’s light. The trees rustle above her, the bushes swaying by the same gentle breeze. It’s a blessing of cool air, slipping between the layers of her armor and brushing against sweat-soaked skin.

It’s high noon, the sun having reached the highest point of its daily journey. Aloy frowns, wiping one hand along the edges of her metal headgear in an attempt to rid herself of the leaking sensation, the way sweat trickles down her skin.

A bath would be nice.

She finds herself reminiscing about the baths of Avad’s palace, especially the rooms with cold water. The chill of flat stone under her bare feet, the soft flickering glow of torchlight…

The sun’s light catches off the smooth rock surfaces of the cliffs surrounding her, the rays breaking through the treetops where their branches thin out to make way for the solid ridges. The reflected light is blinding even when Aloy refuses to look at it directly.

She takes another swig from her waterskin.

Looking for traces of Ilima – any signs of another human being, really – has been hard. She managed to find footsteps leading away from Sunstone Rock that might belong to her, but they ventured off the usual paths quickly.

Unfortunately, Ilima has nature on her side and won’t be found easily, not with her tracks covered by fallen leaves and other signs lost to wind and water. Aloy has to rely on her instincts and understanding of humans more than her Focus, as useful of a tool as it might be.

Ilima is a quiet traveler. Her steps are evenly paced, the sandals she’s wearing not digging too deeply into the earth. She must have packed lightly.

Her method of setting up camp indicates an equally sober mindset – the fire pit Aloy found yesterday was small, the ashes scattered nearby. Aloy can tell she’d slept on a bed made of branches and leaves, the setup creating a slight elevation. The few tufts of fur stuck between some of the twigs
spoke of her bedding, and the cuts on the branches were made by a decent knife.

Aloy had to leave her Strider behind earlier in the morning when her tracking lead her through thicker patches of trees and undergrowth. Besides, the closer she gets to her target, the better she wants to take note of her surroundings. For now, the machines and animals are calm, but if anything spooks a Watcher or alerts one of the songbirds, Aloy wants to hear it, not cause it.

The Chargers grazing along the way back to Sunstone Rock don’t notice Aloy or the sun beating down on them. It makes sense, Aloy supposes. They were made from liquid metal, brought to life among many hotter flames.

Now, after sitting down a few paces from Ilima’s second camp for a short break, Aloy rises to her feet. Blades of grass are bent along the tracks leading away from the camp, towards the Spearshafts. She sets off, following the path while sticking close to cover, keeping a wary eye out for any sudden shifts of movement in the greenery.

It’s a few hours later that she catches a sign of someone nearby – the scent of a fire being blown westwards, smoke rising high above. When she closes in on it, she finds herself in front of a wall of rock. She recognizes the place sure enough, having scaled these rocks before in order to reach one of the metal flowers. A quick scan reveals a single human form up there, sitting down. Relaxed. Unassuming.

Aloy climbs the wall, still mindful of where she’s placing her hands and feet, but all in all it almost seems too easy as she reaches the top and climbs onto the grass-covered surface. There are no Glinthawks to fight off this time, and the woman by the fire is alone, tending to a pot balancing on three stones above the flames.

“Ilima?” she calls out, hoping to avoid a misunderstanding over why she’s here. The woman turns, only a little startled. So far so good. “I have a letter for you. I’m –”

“Savior Aloy,” Ilima says, getting up from her spot by the fire. Her voice is soft. She’s dressed in plain Carja clothes – a tunic, a linen head covering, a leather belt with pouches hung around her waist. She inclines her head in a polite gesture that makes Aloy a little uncomfortable after spending so many days surrounded only by wilderness and soldiers.

“Just Aloy is fine,” she says, approaching the campsite while digging through her own pouches to find the letter she’s supposed to deliver. “They – Saranah – asked me to find and give you this.”

While her posture speaks of a life in a noble society, Ilima’s hands show signs of recent work, the grooves along her fingernails having collected dirt. She takes the letter from Aloy, inviting her to sit on one of the tree stumps while she breaks the wax seal and unrolls the letter.

Aloy waits, watches the breeze pick up some of the ashes from the wood as the fire crackles. She leans back, moving her face away from the heat, and looks out over the Jewel instead.

She catches a glimpse of the Stormbird that guards the lake, its majestic wings moving in slow gestures. At this distance, it could almost be mistaken for a nearby Glinthawk, its scale hard to judge as a solitary shape up there. The machine is mostly a glitter in the sky, a flash of metal touched by the sun, its flight effortless and undisturbed.

The stomping of the Tallneck’s feet comes closer as it continues to patrol its own corner of the Jewel, southeast of their position. This far up its steps sound like a gentle trod instead of the earth-shaking ordeal it is up close. It moves along its path as gracefully as the Stormbird flies, miles and miles apart and in some way still connected, carrying out their own tasks in the same system.
Looking over her shoulder, Aloy catches sight of the Spire. Down on the forest floor of the Jewel it’s near impossible to see that far ahead without trees and other plant life blocking the view, but up here the Spire is as magnificent a landmark as it was entering Meridian from the east.

She watches the triangular sides of the Spire warp around the structure and wonders, not for the first time during her trip, what Elisabet and GAIA might be doing right now. Elisabet didn’t call her through their Focuses last night, and while GAIA told her she was fine, just busy, Aloy can’t help but feel a low unease in her bones.

As much as she enjoys her freedom and being alone in the wilds, she misses Elisabet’s company, her stories and insights.

Across from her, Ilima rolls the letter back up. A second, closer look reveals twin tracks of tears running down her face before she gently pads them away with the tips of her fingers. “Thank you,” she says, glancing up to meet Aloy’s eyes. “I didn’t know she survived when the Shadow Carja attacked. I remember smoke and fire after the house collapsed, and when I pulled myself from the rubble I couldn’t find her. I thought she was dead all this time…”

Her voice cracks. There’s a shaky exhale before Ilima looks at the top part of the letter again, unrolling it just enough to reveal the words addressing her, and Aloy sees her run her thumb across the ink. “I was so afraid, I ran,” she whispers. “If they had found me – alive instead of her – they would have killed me on the spot.”

Aloy feels cold despite the midday sun shining down on them. “No one is going to hurt you for fleeing that day,” she says.

Ilima’s gaze snaps up from the paper, green eyes looking at Aloy closely. “My masters would for abandoning their daughter,” she says, and it’s the certainty in her voice that runs a chill further up Aloy’s spine. “It was my duty to die for her,” she spits out the word with clear disgust, “to sacrifice myself before letting harm come to her.”

“But you weren’t a slave anymore, Avad changed the laws –”

“When the Sun-King abolished slavery, Saranah tried to make me leave – to find a place for myself in the village – but my masters wouldn’t let me. I was born their property and they wanted my weight in shards before letting me go.

“They would have tracked me down if I had gotten away, so I stayed. Saranah would give me jewelry, claiming to anyone else she didn’t like the gemstones embedded in the metal, but they were meant to buy my freedom.” Aloy can see Ilima’s waterlines flooding with fresh tears, but she tilts her head back, blinking fiercely until they no longer threaten to spill. “We were going to bribe a convoy to go beyond the mountains in the north, to the Claim… but then the attack came and none of it mattered.”

Tugging on her lower lip with her teeth, Aloy follows the bright embers of the campfire in their short-lived flights. Slavery isn’t something she’s experienced with, the Nora never condoning such practices in the first place – and even in Meridian she’s only heard stories, of how the palace used to have slaves and how most of the city was built using slave labor.

“I’m sorry,” she ends up saying. “What was done to you was wrong. No one has a right to your freedom.”

Ilima nods, giving her a watery smile. “I know – but what’s done is done. We can’t change where the seeds landed after they sprout.”
They sit in silence for a while, Ilima stirring the stew inside the pot with a wooden spoon. She stores the letter in a leather bag while Aloy scrubs some of the mud off her boots with a flat stone. She’s offered some of the food by Ilima, and her stomach growls before she can refuse – and the smell is pretty good, too.

It’s… really good. Much better than any of her own attempts at cooking. She has half a mind to ask Ilima how she prepared this dish, but stays silent when she sees the vacant look on her face.

“Saranah…” Ilima says, sounding far off. “How did she seem? Was she – well? Was she happy?”

Aloy pauses, spoon halfway to her mouth, and ends up setting it down in the wooden bowl. “She’s quiet. The music she makes is beautiful, and she’s marrying Avad. I guess that’s something to celebrate.” She hesitates, remembering how Saranah had seemed before Vanasha had taken her back inside the palace, that one time.

Ilima reads her hesitation correctly, saying, “she didn’t seem happy, then,” and Aloy shakes her head.

“Her eyes, they’re sad. I’ve heard she’s only marrying him because the noble houses want her to. They think she’ll be able to keep him in line.”

A smile twitches onto Ilima’s face. “Then they don’t know her well enough. She’s only ever spoken in support of his policies – in private, of course.” The smile fades, making way for a frown. Ilima looks at her. “The Sun-King… what kind of man is he?”

“He’s – serious,” she says. “Seems sincere. He um, promised he wouldn’t make her bear a child. If she didn’t – want that. So.”

Ilima nods along with her words, her frown easing somewhat.

“That’s good.” Aloy twists her spoon in the stew. “Right? I mean, for a man he isn’t that bad. At things. Ruling.”

Something in Ilima’s face tells Aloy she probably doesn’t fully share her views on that. “He’s the Sun-King,” Ilima says. “He should be good at ruling, he was chosen by the Sun, after all.”

Aloy hides a cough behind her hand, taking in another spoonful of stew instead of answering with honesty. It figures – Ilima probably spent most of her life living with the Carja.

“Anyway,” she says, trying to divert the conversation back to where they were discussing Avad’s personality, “he said he knows her heart belongs to someone else, and his belongs to Ersa, so. Sounds like he’ll respect her.”

It’s only after having been able to finish another quarter of her bowl that Aloy notices how she’s no longer being asked questions, and looking up she finds Ilima staring at her, the apples of her cheeks a little darker than they were before, her mouth ajar.

“What?” Aloy asks, stuffing the food still in her mouth to one side for the time being. “I’m no good with this whole – love thing – but it sounds like it could be worse. Maybe Avad will invite whoever Saranah loves to the palace so they can hold hands or something. He’s nice like that, he’d do that.”

It’s only when Ilima’s cheeks keep darkening, the blush spreading to her ears, that something clicks.

Aloy points her spoon at Ilima, half of its contents falling off during the motion. “You’re the – you! The one she – !”
“He – loved Captain Ersa?” Ilima says, which, yeah, obviously he did, but that’s not what’s important at the moment.

“Saranah loves you!” Aloy finishes, then stares at her dripping spoon, putting it back into her bowl. What a shame. She chews on what’s left in her mouth. “Well, I’m sure if you come back with me and I talk to Avad he can fix things. You wouldn’t be able to have a public relationship, but neither could he and Ersa, and uh…”

Yeah. Maybe not delving too deeply into that history is the better option here, with how things ended for them. The stew suddenly tastes less good than it did before as she remembers the cellar and…

She shudders. Don’t think about that.

“It’s… not that simple,” Ilima says, breaking Aloy away from her memories. “As much as Saranah cares for me, and as much as I hope for her happiness, that city still belongs to people who would find a way to keep me there.”

The thought of anyone trying to enslave someone again even when the ruling king has outlawed it is disturbing.

“Besides,” Ilima continues, “there are other things I need to do now. I will follow my mother’s footsteps back to Plainsong, to see the fields she wanted to become a part of.”

It’s an act Aloy can relate to, her own journey into the far west coming to mind. Looking for Elisabet there was something she had to do, and judging by the look on Ilima’s face, the stern set of her eyes, it must be the same for her.

She finishes her stew, thanking Ilima for the meal. As she’s checking her gear, seeing if she’s still well prepared for the journey back, Ilima approaches her holding a bracelet made of plain wooden beads. She can tell by their weight that they’re hollow.

“Here,” she says, “please give this to Saranah. Tell her it contains my laughs, my tears, the touch of my hands – all of it protected inside the seeds. Tell her to hold onto them, to keep them close, and that I’m doing the same thing. Tell her I have her voice, the softest songs and whispers, the moments between dusk and dawn.

“Tell her I’ll see the fields of Plainsong and take her memory with me, and we’ll meet again every time the rains wet her skin, when her feet stand on soaked soil – when the flowers bloom under her sight. I’ll never be truly gone.”

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FROM: GAIA
TO: Elisabet Sobenc
SUBJECT: 1/1/3042

A happy new year, and many happy returns of the day. May you achieve your goals this year, Elisabet.

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FROM: Elisabet Sobenc
TO: GAIA
SUBJECT: Re: 1/1/3042
To a year I never envisioned seeing beyond my hopes and dreams.

p.s. you’re a sap, GAIA ;)

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Day and night cycles by as Aloy travels the roads north to Meridian. She stays out of range of roaming Longlegs, overrides a Charger for convenience. The days are warm and the nights are cold, her meals undercooked – and then overcooked – and her bedding offers only the most basic of comforts.

GAIA mentions having a recording of her conversation with Ilima and if she wanted, Aloy could let Saranah hear Ilima’s words herself. Aloy thanks her as she shapes ridge-wood into arrow shafts.

Still, when Elisabet calls her later that day while she’s seated on the back of her Charger, she begins to long for Meridian. It’s strange because the city itself, the fullness of it, the people clamoring everywhere, are things Aloy doesn’t miss at all – but Elisabet is there, and Aloy wants to walk across the bridge of the palace and find her waiting at the top of those stairs.

It’ll be a few hours until she arrives. For now, she listens to the stories Elisabet tells. They’re working on creating a lure for MINERVA, which sounds brilliant.

“There were these unsolvable problems in mathematics in the world before,” Elisabet explains. “Abstract questions no one could answer. MINERVA wasn’t designed to solve them, but it was designed to solve a problem – namely the code surrounding the FARO Swarm.

“Based on what MINERVA left behind here it’s safe to say it never stopped being interested in encrypting information. So who knows, it might be interested in trying to solve other information, too.”

Aloy is able to catch a glimpse of the Spire through the canopy of branches. “And you were able to remember these problems?” she says as she watches sunlight bounce off the metal plates, averting her eyes after not too long.

“Um. We’re not tackling the hardest of questions at the moment,” Elisabet says. “I’m not even sure MINERVA would be able to handle algebraic geometry because of its complexities.”

Elisabet goes on to talk about games the Old Ones used to play, ones involving numbers and symbols. It’s… interesting, but without being able to picture what these puzzles would look like, Aloy finds herself only understanding about half of what Elisabet tells her.

When Elisabet realizes it too, she apologizes. “I can show you when you get back,” she says, and Aloy agrees that that might be best.

The hours go by, the sun rising and then falling, when finally the walls of Meridian appear beyond the last trees marking the edge of the woods. Aloy taps her Charger’s neck, petting the machine absentmindedly. The branches make way for the sight of red rooftops.

So close.

Aloy lets the machine go just outside the gates, ducking in as a single merchant rolls their cart out. Elisabet would be back at the palace, having visited the Spire earlier on in the day. She said so herself.

The closer she gets to the elevators the more feelings start bundling in her chest, squirming around
like rats. They spoke this morning – so seeing each other won’t be like coming back from a week’s hunt, not really – but the holo isn’t able to capture Elisabet’s likeness the way she is in life. Not fully.

Aloy raps her knuckles against the side of the elevator box once she’s inside, waiting for the chains to pull her up. She double checks one of her pouches – Ilima’s bracelet is still put away safely – before the doors open and she heads for the marketplace.

It’s only once she’s passed three stalls without being yelled at to buy someone’s fruits that she realizes how empty the streets are. In fact, the stalls are too. There are only a few Carja and Oseram craftsmen around, but they all seem to be minding their own business. No one even looks at her.

Apparently miracles do happen.

Unlike most occasions where Aloy will rush through the narrow streets and past vendors, trying to avoid being stopped by someone, she walks at a leisurely pace, taking her time to look around.

The windows of most houses are covered from the inside with black veils. It isn’t a particularly hot day out – it’s cool compared to her first visits to the city – so it probably isn’t to combat the heat.

As captivated as she is by the changes made during her absence, she doesn’t notice the other person on the road until they collide, bumping into each other before stepping aside quickly. She’s about to apologize when the Carja beats her to it, bowing their head and –

For an artisan, they’re wearing immaculate clothing.

Aloy tracks the Carja as they walk away. Their sandals seems to be of the same make as Talanah’s – not something she’s seen anyone outside of nobility wear.

She’s about to continue on when she hears the singing, low and mournful, coming from the Temple of the Sun. Following the sound she finds more Carja dressed like workers, but all of them too clean – or wearing deliberate stains of mud on their clothes – to actually belong to the village below.

It’s hard not to laugh when one of them is still wearing their elaborate face paints, golden marks kissing their temples. Why anyone would do this is beyond her – but then, as she comes closer to the Temple, she sees one isolated figure on the balcony kneeling towards the Spire.

Avad.

He’s not wearing his usual garb, either, dressed in a plain tunic. Only a thin golden band wrapped around his forehead marks his royalty. For the Carja, this must be as close to showing Avad as a normal person to the public as they would dare.

The priests around him aren’t dressed in red, either. Instead, their cloaks match the color of desert sand – the kind that is light, not orange. They sing, their voices merging together in a song of anguish, and the people gathered around them join in.

It’s like watching the Matriarchs lead the Nora into prayer.

Aloy keeps her eyes on Avad a little longer. He seems… pained. While he isn’t someone she knows to keep his feelings a secret, she’s never seen him like this in front of a crowd – this open and exposed.

His gaze is on the Spire, never wavering, not even when the Sun-Priests howl more names of their ancestors, their volume rising as the crowd joins in. It’ll be a few more hours before the sun has set completely, but something tells Aloy they will all be here for that moment.
Aloy turns away, slipping back into the empty streets, when she catches a single name being repeated again and again.

Kadaman, Kadaman, Kadaman.

She rubs a hand over her arm, quickening her pace as she walks through shadow-filled alleys, telling herself the chill raising fine hairs on her skin is from the lack of sun, nothing more.

The soldiers on the bridge acknowledge her by straightening their spines and she gives one of them a nod. There. At least that’s normal. The courtyard’s lack of bustle is excused by everyone having gathered at the temple.

“GAIA,” she says, tapping into her Focus, “Elisabet is still here, right?”

“Yes, Aloy,” GAIA answers immediately. “She is currently in the Solarium.”

Taking the stairs two at a time, Aloy makes her way up. Her back aches and her feet are sore, but none of that matters when Elisabet is waiting for her return. She rounds the corner, making her way through the gate leading to the Solarium, and –

Everything stops as a single image ingrains itself onto her mind.

Elisabet’s red hair splayed on the brick floor, her hands raised to ward off an incoming attack – an attack at the hands of Vanasha, a spear pointed at Elisabet’s throat.

Her bow is in her hands, arrow between her fingers, a roar building in her throat when Erend steps into view, his back turned to her.

“And that’s why you don’t try to take it from that angle,” he says in a friendly voice – relaxed, explaining, teaching – before Aloy can demand what in All-Mother’s bountiful world they’re doing.

That’s when Elisabet’s head rolls up, exposing her neck further to Vanasha, and her eyes meet Aloy’s – without a trace of fear in them.

“Hey Aloy,” she says and smiles, streaks of dirt covering her cheeks. “You’re back early.”

She relaxes the string, lets the arrow hang from the tips of her fingers, and a rush of satisfaction follows when two more heads turn to face her – and there’s fear in Erend’s eyes.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone:

I'm slowly getting into the habit of writing again after taking some time off for myself. I wanted to participate in NaNo this year but HAHAH unless I write 4k a day I won't make it... but gonna write anyway c;

Many thanks to burbear, alpacas, CZGoldEdition, and Jon for beta reading, idea bouncing, and the effing code bits I wanted because I for sure am not an engineer <3

And a big, huge thank you to everyone who is still checking in and reading this. <3 <3 <3

No promises on when the next chapter will be out, but I'm definitely aiming at once at month, and more if I can manage it. I still very much want to finish this fic, so to the people who are still reading this - sorry it's taking so long but I'm not abandoning it!

Something has changed Elisabet.

The warm torchlight doesn’t hide the scratches marring otherwise perfect skin as they undress. There’s dirt lining her fingernails, dust in her hair – things that don’t matter when Aloy finds them on her own person, or anyone else for that matter, but this is different.

While most of it washes away even before they enter the larger baths, the large blue cloth Elisabet wraps around her body hiding the rest, Aloy has already memorized the images.

At least there’s no blood – though machines bleed differently, and maybe it’s like that for Elisabet as well. Aloy watches her closely, how her feet pad the tiled floor of the baths, her footing as certain as ever.

The holo’s had always shown her as a very clean person, taken care of like a noble, but Elisabet doesn’t seem to mind the dirt. The muddied stains on her legs had been a few days old.

Aloy sinks into the welcoming water of the large round bath, breathing in deeply as her aching joints are enveloped by a pleasant warmth. She brought along her wooden comb – the servants all seem to be attending the strange ceremony or doing other things, which is more than fine – and once she’s ready to move again, she sits on the side of one of her legs, resting one arm on the ledge of the bath before undoing her braids.

Elisabet joins her, dipping her feet down in the water while remaining seated on the ledge. “Want me to help you?” she asks, and Aloy shakes her head, then quietly regrets her quick dismissal.

She isn’t angry with Elisabet for training with Erend and Vanasha, but maybe now it’ll seem that way. She runs her fingers through one of her braids, untwisting the strands where they’ve tangled while trying to think of the words to say.

Erend had tried to defend their actions, had said they were only doing the basics, ‘nothing
dangerous.’ Well, it had seemed plenty dangerous to Aloy – if they had wanted to teach Elisabet some basic self defense they could’ve done so without weapons, or given her a bow to practice with – asked Talanah for help if they aren’t skilled enough with that themselves.

A bow could keep her at a distance, away from the heat of a fight, and practicing – unmoving targets don’t accidentally punch back, and even when starting to shoot at moving ones it’ll be rabbits or turkeys, not facing the end of a spear wielded by someone who is fully trained in combat.

A voice inside of her wonders if they didn’t think of the dangers because they have seen Aloy fight – have fought alongside her – and maybe when they saw Elisabet they imagined her to be just as capable, just as drenched in Carja and Nora warfare as the rest of them.

All the while Elisabet hadn’t seemed concerned in the least, reacting to Aloy’s inspections with a gentle smile and a look in her eyes Aloy struggled to identify. Was she pleased with the turn of events? Didn’t she see the danger herself?

Even machines can be damaged by accident – and if Elisabet got hurt, who would be able to heal her?

A part of her is angry she didn’t ask Elisabet about her sparring incident with Erend more – to confirm what they were doing exactly. She could have talked to Erend, could have…

Not that it matters, now. She glances next to her. Elisabet is okay, she’s unharmed and… she seems happy.

Elisabet catches her looking and ducks her head, a small smile on her lips but something different behind her eyes. “Tell me about your journey?” she says, hands holding the corners of her blue cloth loosely.

This she can do. “Sticky,” Aloy answers. “Lot of heat, lot of flies. I have a – here – ” she pulls herself out of the water, sitting on the edge next to Elisabet to show her her foot, feeling a hint of pride at the way Elisabet grimaces.

“Is that a blister?”

“Well, it was,” Aloy says. The skin tore during the day and without the fluid inside, the spot is a bright, sore red. “My feet got soft. Rost – he’d tell me to walk more. He probably – I don’t think he’d like me riding machines. ‘Machines aren’t friends, Aloy,’ and all that. ‘They’ll stomp you with their hooves.’”

She’s miming the way his hands would imitate a Strider’s legs as she repeats his words, becoming aware of it when Elisabet hides a laugh behind her hand.

“That’s probably good advice,” Elisabet says, and Aloy snorts, getting back into the water. “Do you have anything to treat that with? Some form of disinfectant?”

“Valley’s Blush,” she says, shaking most of the water from her hands before tending to her hair again. “I made a salve not too long ago, so that – or Salvebrush.”

Elisabet wrinkles her nose, laughing. “Earwax-y bullshit. But hey, if it works…”

Soft footsteps and a shadow traveling along the wall announce the arrival of Vanasha, and looking over to her Aloy is surprised to find her wrapped in one of the bath cloths as well. Her rarely visible short dark hair is pulled up into a ponytail, and while the edges of her eyes still hold lingering traces of kohl, her other markings are gone.
She moves with elegance, coming to a halt at the edge of the bath on the opposite end of where they’re seated. “Ladies,” she says in greeting, inclining her head with a smile that’s a little too perfect – one meant to win someone over. “Surely you don’t mind if I join you?”

Aloy’s eyes flit over to Elisabet’s, expecting her to announce they’d rather be alone – but she finds herself frowning when all Elisabet does is gesture at the water and nod. Not long before she left Elisabet had held a knife to ward off Vanasha when she entered their room unexpectedly, and now they’re not only sparring under Erend’s supervision but bathing as well?

What happened?

Vanasha lets the bath cloth slide down her body in a way that makes Aloy distrust her own eyes. It’s as though she turns the fabric into a liquid before it falls in a circle around her feet, and when she moves into the bath she makes use of the steps built into the design, taking one stone tread at a time with unnatural grace.

She hums sitting down on the underwater seat, crossing her ankles with pointed toes. “Wonderful,” she purrs, closing her eyes a second in a blissful display. “Won’t you get in the bath with us, Elisabet?” she asks, and Aloy doesn’t trust the way her eyes narrow, either. “The temperature is just right.”

There’s a challenge in her voice and if it were directed at her, Aloy would feel the need to meet it head on – but Elisabet can’t, not without risking a reveal of what she is.

She’s trying to think of an excuse for Elisabet, a reason why she can’t enter the water, and almost jumps when she spots the blue cloth slipping from the corner of her eye. She reaches for it, tries to help Elisabet stay covered but –

Elisabet is the one letting it fall?

She’s the one… and now Vanasha will see –

Aloy freezes, her hand stuck in mid-air while Elisabet shows her full body, the skin without marks or hair, and all she can think is Vanasha knows, because how can she see this and still believe her to be made of flesh?

Almost like an afterthought, Aloy registers Elisabet’s voice saying, “You know what? I think I will join you,” with an undertone Aloy recognizes because that’s how she’d phrase it too, that’s what she’d say and do.

Her head snaps towards Vanasha when she hears a laugh ringing in the air, and the reason for it comes to her just as Elisabet slides into the water next to her. The only way a reveal like this could spark anything other than shock is if –

“You know,” she says, pointing a finger at Vanasha.

Then comes the realization that if Vanasha knew, and Elisabet responded like that –

She points the same finger at Elisabet who is sporting a sheepish expression on her face. “You told her?”

“It wasn’t really telling her,” Elisabet says slowly. “She more or less confronted me about it and I… didn’t lie.” The last bit is a half-mumbled mess but Aloy hears it all too clearly.

“I already knew,” Vanasha says, joining in. “And I’ve spoken to GAIA, too.”
This is what happens, Aloy’s mind yells at her. She leaves for a week and now Vanasha probably knows everything they have been keeping a secret from the world since Elisabet woke up.

She sinks into the water with a groan until it comes to rest against her upper lip, and then remembers she didn’t want to actually wet her hair yet and scrambles to sit up again, water splashing around her. It’s too late – she finds half of her braids thoroughly soaked by the time she picks them out of the water.

She groans again, rubbing her face with her hands. It’ll be a nightmare to brush all of that out, now.

“Need some help, Freckles?” Vanasha is already moving towards them through the water before Aloy can say no, and at this point she might as well cave in and accept. Her hands have grown too impatient to brush out the ends with care, and the tugging on her scalp would only add to that.

She hands Vanasha the comb with a scowl before staring at the twisting surface of the water. She can feel it displace next to her where Vanasha sits, and picks a single braid to pull apart herself, little by little.

“What if someone walks in?” she says, looking at Elisabet. “Udina could enter at any moment – unless this is where you tell me she knows, too.”

They both answer her, Elisabet giving a short and simple, “They won’t,” while Vanasha says, “It’s the Day of Shadows, the Morning of No Light. The only servants left in the palace are preparing the evening meal.”

“Is that why everyone was gathered out there?”

Vanasha’s hands still in her hair for a moment, then continue gently untangling the braids. “Yes,” she answers. “It’s a day of mourning, Freckles. Avad called it into practice after taking back Meridian. Today the Carja remember everyone lost and murdered, in the Sun-Ring or otherwise.”

It makes more sense now with Vanasha’s explanation, although the way the nobles were dressed isn’t made any less strange by it. “Why didn’t you join them?” she asks, catching the way Elisabet is paying attention to Vanasha too, now.

“And stand next to a noble complicit in years of slavery and madness, pretending we are the same and our hurt is equal? Most of the grieving done there is performative – I do my fair share of that already, don’t you think?”

It’s something Aloy doesn’t know how to answer. Parts of the ceremony had seemed silly – and still do, to her – but parts of it had appeared sincere as well. Avad’s grief, for instance, as she remembers the pained look on his face.

Once her braids have been untangled for the most part, Vanasha starts running her wooden comb through them, gently brushing all the hair out.

“I found Ilima,” Aloy says, and Vanasha hums. “Gave her the letter. She has a gift for Saranah in return. I can give it to you –”

“Oh no, little huntress,” Vanasha interrupts, as if she’s reading her mind. “I think you should hand over the gift yourself. Lady Saranah would appreciate hearing all this from you personally, I imagine.”

As much as she wants to refuse purely on the fact that it’s been a week and she’s tired, she knows Vanasha has a point. “Fine,” she grumbles. Part of her feels bad for not wanting to do it herself and
trying to shift that responsibility onto Vanasha, but if Ilima was moved to tears just from reading a letter…

She has a feeling in her gut Saranah might not be able to keep her composure, either, and although it’s a sad situation for both of them, Aloy doesn’t really know them – a slave and a noble, branded by years of captivity and stuck because of rules and traditions…

Will they expect Aloy to console someone she hasn’t even spoken with once?

“You’ll do fine,” Vanasha says, “and afterwards you can partake in the feast, if it’s any consolation.”

She raises her head a little at that. “A feast? I thought this was a day of mourning.” Meeting Elisabet’s eyes is rewarded with a shrug – apparently she didn’t know about this, either.

Vanasha laughs. “Oh little huntress, you’ve been in Meridian for so many of the Sun’s risings and fallings, and still know so little of the Carja. You are sweeter than a mouthful of honey.”

They finish bathing and use fragrant oils to massage their limbs per Vanasha’s instructions after most of their skin has dried. While Aloy has come to think of Elisabet’s body as just different from her own, it’s strange to see her moving around so freely with someone else in the room. Elisabet even chuckles when Vanasha helps her oil her feet, exclaiming her surprise over the fact that Elisabet doesn’t have any calluses.

“Do you scrape them off?” Vanasha asks, and when Elisabet shakes her head, “Do they not form at all?”

Aloy stops applying Valley’s Blush salve to her broken blister to observe them with a close eye. While Vanasha’s questions seem innocent enough, they put her on edge. All of this attention towards Elisabet’s body – will Vanasha relay everything to Marad? Memories of Mother’s Watch come to mind, and the Nora didn’t even know of Elisabet’s otherness.

“Well, you don’t grow any hair on your body either, I don’t see how that’s so different,” Aloy says, peering over her pulled up knee, her voice coming out more gruff than she initially meant to.

Vanasha’s head turns to her, her eyebrows raised. “My hairs are waxed off,” she says, and – what? Why? “Most Carja get at least some parts of their bodies done – Udina didn’t show you how? Your legs would be wonderful candidates.”

Her eyes widen at the idea of anyone removing any of her hairs and she quickly closes her jar of salve. “No one is going to be doing anything to my legs,” she says, then addresses Elisabet with, “That’s not normal. Is it? You don’t do that. Right?”

It only takes Elisabet’s hesitant oh, umh’s for Aloy to rise to her feet and carefully pad over to her pile of belongings on one of the stone seats.

“I no longer grow any hair, but when I did, sometimes I’d…” she hears Elisabet explain to Vanasha, and as soon as her jar is stuffed back into one of her pouches Aloy looks at her pointedly.

“What would you do that?” She doesn’t really expect an answer because this? This is pure Carja madness. The Old Ones couldn’t have been like that. Aloy had presumed perhaps the Carja weren’t able to grow much hair on their bodies other than what they had on their heads – had thought it was perhaps an effect of living in such a hot and moist environment, although the Oseram seemed unaffected by it – but they remove it? Voluntarily?

Looking around for her clothes, Aloy is relieved to find clean Carja Silks have been laid out next to
her belongings and starts changing into them. Elisabet and Vanasha are taking their time, talking between actions, and while Aloy wants to talk to both of them – separately – she wants out of the baths. After the mention of a feast, she’d started to feel the empty pit of her stomach.

Maybe there’ll be blueberries again.

Vanasha is still poking at Elisabet, now examining the ports at the back of her neck, and Elisabet is allowing it – even moving her hair out of the way so she can have a closer look. “No, they don’t hurt,” Elisabet says. “I can’t even feel them.”

Aloy lingers near the exit. There’s a crawling unease that accompanies the thought of leaving them together, alone, but at the same time she doesn’t want to give a voice to it. She trusts Vanasha – as a fighter, as an informant, as someone to depend on – but to leave Elisabet in her hands is different, especially given the fact Vanasha knows so much about her true nature.

GAIA’s words in her ear are a welcome distraction from her internal monologue. “You do not need to worry, Aloy,” she says. “I won’t let any harm come to Elisabet.”

Of course. She breathes out slowly. GAIA will protect Elisabet, is capable of alarming Aloy if something were to go wrong. That knowledge makes it easier to close the door to the baths behind her and head back into the empty palace hallways.

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It isn’t long after dropping off most of her stuff in their shared bedroom that Aloy notices the return of people to the hallways – some talking with excitement while others seem to retain a more sober mood.

She makes her way to the Solarium, the smell of food guiding her. There’s sweetness and spices lingering in the air, and as a servant walks by she sees they’re holding a plate filled with small breads in one hand, carrying a dish of grilled vegetables in the other.

It’s a feast befitting the Carja’s extravagance. Tables have been placed in the Solarium, the usual sitting area now used as a communal space for the nobles and royals. Most of them are wearing their more luxurious clothes again, even reapplied their markings of status.

Aloy scans the room, unable to find Avad, and then sets her eyes on a bunch of plates filled with freshly peeled fruit. The red flowers on top are a nice touch, if completely decorative. She takes one of them, holding its delicate stem between her fingers as she observes the small drops of honey glistening on the petals like dew. It’s beautiful… and unnecessary.

What would Rost think of that?

There’s a pang in her chest as she thinks of all the things she would like to show him, all the places they were never able to see together – but it’s not as painful as it once was.

She sets the flower back with its brethren, letting it fulfill its purpose on the table.

The voices around her are loud, every movement around her asking for attention. It’s like the feast in Mother’s Heart except ten times as big, the music being made from the corner of the Solarium making it hard to separate sounds.

At least in the Jewel every sound has a clear place and function, unlike the human mess on the terrace.
Across a sea of people Aloy catches sight of Erend, a goblet clutched in his right hand while speaking with a noble. His jaw is set tight, and when he turns his head her way their eyes meet. His widen, his lips parting as if to speak or call out her name – but they’re too far apart to even hear each other.

He must not like the person he’s speaking with very much judging by the way he downs most of his drink and then pushes the goblet at them, ignoring whatever was being said to him moments before.

Aloy observes him closely, watches him try to maneuver through the masses in order to come her way.

Good. She needs to talk to him – about what happened, about how he can’t expect Elisabet to be one of his Vanguard, fully trained and hardened like cold steel – but as he slips between the nobles she loses sight of him, and turning away from the table of food she finds she has had a quiet observer herself.

“Savior Aloy,” a young girl dressed in white says, approaching her. Aloy recognizes her as one of Saranah’s entourage. “Please, come with me, Lady Saranah would like to speak with you.”

One last look over her shoulder confirms that Erend is nowhere to be found, probably stolen away by another noble with questions for the Vanguard’s captain.

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The young handmaiden leads her down the stone stairs to the lower balconies. Every step they take makes the loud voices of the feast die down more, making it easier to think.

The sun has set enough for the stars to appear in the sky, some of them covered by a lone cloud but many more twinkling in the far, far distance. There’s a canopy of silk set up on the balcony they’re approaching, and beneath it, sat on soft pillows and with a small share of the feast displayed on a low table, is Saranah.

Avad’s future queen strokes the pillows next to her, patting the fabric gently in a way to beckon her over. It’s only when Aloy has already sat down that she notices the complete absence of guards and handmaidens.

Even the young one has disappeared.

It’s almost peaceful down here, the sounds of the feast no longer clogging up all of Aloy’s senses. The view the balcony offers is that of the trees and mountain cliff sides – a reminder of what’s out there, just out of reach. The rustle of leaves calls to her.

Searching Saranah’s face reveals a similar longing in her eyes. Aloy has never been this close to the woman before, but as Saranah’s gaze is still cast out over the treetops she takes a moment to study her.

Her lips are full, her skin smooth with a shine that draws moonlight to it. Her dark hair curls in ways Aloy’s never does, not even when she undoes her braids after letting them dry, and she isn’t wearing any Carja markings, her eyelids naked in their absence.

Every part of her looks like it has been handled with care for years, like it’s maintained by skilled hands all day and made to look like a part of the palace’s architecture – clean curves and straight lines, hands that do not work and feet that do not travel.

And yet Aloy finds something so familiar in her eyes, a strong wish for freedom that doesn’t belong
behind gates of Oseram make.

Saranah looks away from the trees, turning her head to meet Aloy’s eyes. Her lips show a soft smile that hurts.

Aloy clears her throat, reaching for the pouch on her belt. She undoes the clasp and takes out the bracelet made of wooden beads. “I found Ilima,” she says. “She told me to give you this, and that – it holds –”

She stumbles over the words, trying to remember what it was Ilima had said exactly. Her speech had been so fluid, like the words had no trouble leaving her mouth the way they do Aloy’s.

Giving the bracelet to Saranah, Aloy reaches for her Focus, opening up the recording GAIA saved earlier before holding it out to the woman. “Here,” she says, “if you place this on the side of your head, it will let you hear her voice.”

Saranah responds with caution, taking the Focus with careful fingers before attaching it to her temple. Her eyes widen, and Aloy can tell she’s listening to the recording. Her grip on the bracelet tightens, and just like Ilima her eyes start to brighten with tears, slowly flooding the lower ridges of her eyelids until they shimmer.

Aloy has to look away, something inside of her responding with discomfort at seeing someone cry like that – open and vulnerable and real. Besides, she reasons, maybe Saranah would prefer it if no one observed her closely during such an intimate moment.

If they were mates – or something as close to mates as the Carja have – then Aloy feels like she might be able to understand it, or at least in part. Rost never told her about his mate, the one who died before Aloy was ever born, but for him to abandon the tribe and become a Death-seeker in order to avenger her and their daughter…

She tucks her feet under her knees, her hands resting on her ankles. To feel a love for someone so strongly… although Aloy supposes she does know what that’s like, to act out of love, even if it isn’t the love someone holds for a mate.

The softest of hands touches the bare skin of her upper arm, drawing her eyes back up to meet Saranah’s face. Her Focus is held out to her in the other hand, and she takes it, slipping it back where it belongs, a network of triangular shapes briefly lighting up the surrounding space before fading.

Saranah keeps looking at her, the gleaming of her eyes showing gratitude as she wets her lips. “Thank you,” she rasps, and – her voice sounds like shattered glass, a whisper and a scrape all at once. It’s harsh and broken, and Aloy realizes she’s never heard Saranah speak before, either.

“Thank you,” Saranah repeats, “I had hoped – if anyone could find her…”

Her voice fades out of existence, but she isn’t done talking yet. Aloy watches her lips closely, making out the words, it would have been you, our savior.

Aloy shakes her head. “No, I’m not – I’m just me. At the battle – I was doing what needed to be done, I didn’t do it to become a symbol –”

Saranah reaches for her hands, holding them with soft tenderness. ‘You saved Meridian,’ she mouths. ‘You saved us.’

Her words are delivered with sincerity instead of reverence, her eyes taking Aloy in instead of raising her far above the others.
“I had to,” Aloy says. “I needed to.”

‘You did,’ Saranah adds, nodding gently. She reaches out again, drawing Aloy into a warm embrace that smells of sweet spices.

She isn’t sure how to react at first, shoulders stiffening at Saranah’s touch, but the embrace isn’t meant to entrap her. It isn’t like the way people try to touch her hair or garb sometimes in passing. She relaxes into it, letting her hands rest on the silky fabric covering Saranah’s upper arms – and is reminded of Vala in a way, even though their personalities could not be more different.

The embrace ends when Saranah draws back, taking an adorned goblet from the table of food and slowly drinking from it. They sit in silence for a while, making the breath Saranah draws an audible interruption.

“Thank you for returning her to me,” she says, her voice back to a harsh whisper. She’s holding the bracelet close to her stomach, her thumb and forefinger pressed to one of the beads. Whatever else she wanted to say is lost in a fit of coughs that wrack her whole body.

Appearing suddenly from the shadows is Vanasha, her hands holding on to Saranah’s shoulders. “Breathe, my lady,” she says, taking the goblet once more and pressing it into Saranah’s hands. “Don’t let them hear.”

Saranah’s eyes are closed in a mixture of pain and concentration, her shoulders still quaking as she tries to drink from the goblet. For a moment the fit seems to pass, and when Saranah opens her eyes they shine brightly, finding Aloy’s again. “Th – ank – you –” she tries to get out, the words choking her, and Vanasha urges her to her feet.

“Up, my lady,” she says, holding the goblet in one hand while assisting Saranah with her other, “up and inside. Don’t speak.”

Aloy watches as Saranah is ushered into the palace through wooden doors, and when they close behind them she’s left all alone on the balcony.

The quiet is broken by the voices and music drifting from the feast upstairs but she feels no need to go back and join them immediately. She waits for the doors to open again, and when they don’t she sets her eyes on the table of food next to her. It doesn’t look like anyone else will be coming along and eating from it any time soon.

Next to the platters of fruit there is a dish filled with glistening fig-sized balls of dough. They’re sticky to the touch and taste of honey and something peppery Aloy can’t quite place. She takes a second one before getting up.

She taps into her Focus, watching the world being enveloped by a play of light when she startles – the shape of Vanasha being lit up in the corner of her eye. The Focus’ lines disappear as Vanasha comes closer, the spymaster’s eyes unnaturally wide.

“You do not speak of this,” Vanasha whispers, “to anyone.”

Of what? Of them meeting? Of Saranah not being well?

“Her voice,” Vanasha stresses, reading her confusion correctly, and suddenly Aloy remembers the story Avad told her – the one in which Saranah had sung beautifully, enamoring the crowds of the Sun-Ring.

She remembers what Talanah had told her, about the other noblewoman being rejected a chance at
being Avad’s bride for missing a finger. It makes the pit of her stomach ache when she recalls the longing in Saranah’s eyes as she had looked out over the treetops.

For a second Aloy imagines her out there in the wilderness, climbing rock faces and splitting her skin open, bleeding red on the stones – enduring it all without complaints just to stand next to Ilima.

She swallows thickly. “I’m not going to tell anyone,” she says softly, and Vanasha nods, her dark eyes reflecting torchlight.

“Then I’ll keep your secrets, too.”

---

Aloy ducks out of the palace, moving quietly along the streets towards the elevator. The guards operating it don’t ask any questions as she enters the box, and she waits in silence for it to start descending.

“Hey, GAIA,” she says halfway down. “Can you let Elisabet know I’ll be back later?”

“Of course,” GAIA answers, as if she’s standing right next to her. “Do you require time alone, Aloy?”

She huffs, a dry laugh never quite escaping her as she peers through the metal bars of the elevator. “Yeah,” she says, but she doesn’t, not really, so she adds, “no.”

There’s a pause on GAIA’s end. “Has something upset you, Aloy?”

Different events cross her mind, all of them contributing in some way to the need to escape that’s been building inside of her, but none of them quite big enough to point out. It’s Erend and Vanasha, Avad and the feast, Saranah and her voice, and even in some ways Elisabet.

“You can always talk to me,” GAIA says in her soft, understanding tones, and Aloy nods.

The village is quiet, the windows to the houses still covered with black fabric, showing only faint lights from inside the buildings. There’s no music, no grand feast being held. The few people still out are tending to their own business and Aloy slips away, into the farmlands.

She makes it to the low wooden fence surrounding a small shed and clacks her tongue, rapping her knuckles against one of the wooden posts. There’s a rustling sound as a large shape shifts in the shadows, twisting in the hay before rising to its feet, and then another from inside the shed, and another.

Aloy climbs atop the fence, balancing her weight on the top beam while resting her feet on the lower one as the boars approach her. They sniff her boots and legs, their snouts twitching. One of them tries to eat a part of her sole before she pushes it away, the dense body hardly moving.

She takes some bread from her pouch and tears small pieces from it, throwing them one by one in the boars’ pen. They squabble over it, trying to push one another aside to get to the bread first. Aloy takes a bite of it herself, chewing it to mush as her thoughts race.

Before leaving the palace she’d taken more food from the tables knowing no one would be missing out. In a way the boars and nobles are not that different – both consume without caring where their food came from – but at least the boars don’t try to make small-talk.

They eat the bread she offers them and go back to their napping once it’s all gone. Only one of the
boars stays, rubbing its leathery back against the toes of her boots while making soft grunting noises. These boars are different from their counterparts out in the wild – they don’t run when Aloy approaches them because they’re not afraid.

Aloy pets the coarse back of the boar, the dusty bristles brushing against her hand. She gives the bristles a gentle tug, but they’re stuck in the skin firmly. Some artisans use them to make paint brushes, she knows. Maybe she could give some to Sekuli if she ever went up north into Banuk territory again.

Those thoughts lead back to traveling, and traveling leads to danger which brings her back to Elisabet training with weapons, and round and round the images in her mind go.

She notices the elevator connected to the northern bridge lowering but doesn’t pay much attention to it until Erend comes down from its path, heading directly for the boar pen. His stride doesn’t seem as confident as it usually is and he doesn’t head over to her side immediately either, coming to a halt at the other side of the fence.

He rests his hands on the fence, the wood creaking as he leans some of his weight onto it. “Hey,” he says.

Aloy digs up some of the blueberries she was saving for herself and throws them into the pen, keeping her eyes trained on the boars that come on over again, their bodies jiggling as they trod. She keeps watching them, her eyes burning softly as she refuses to blink.

She can hear Erend sigh and the wood groan before he says, “I gather you’re… angry. With me.”

Well, yeah.

Aloy blinks at her own admission. She doesn’t want to be angry with Erend. She doesn’t want to be angry with anyone, but it’s there, right at the center of her chest, a red hot burning mass that threatens to spill from her tongue if she lets it.

She pushes it down and shifts her eyes to Erend. “You shouldn’t have trained –” she begins, then, feeling the heat rising, swallows and starts anew. “I… am afraid… of losing her. If she gets hurt, and I’m not there…”

Erend nods, the corners of his mouth twisted in a grimace. “I understand –” he tries to say and she cuts him off.

“She’s all I have left, Erend. I didn’t have her before, and now I do, and she’s everything –”

The words clog up her throat and she grabs more blueberries instead of trying to force them out. She throws the blueberries into the pen one by one until they’re gone, at which point she looks at Erend, meeting his eyes.

In the end she shrugs, letting her hands fall between her legs as the gesture brings across what she’s feeling on the inside better than words, and Erend nods.

What am I supposed to do?

The fence shakes momentarily as Erend climbs over it, his boots making a squelching sound as they encounter the pen’s mud. He saunters up to her, ending up standing next to her knee as he taps the adjacent piece of fence with his fingers like a drum.

“She’s strong, Aloy.”
He’s standing close enough that she can smell a lack of alcohol on his breath. It’s the kind of proximity that transfers body heat and along with it a sense of discomfort. Aloy averts her eyes, drawing her limbs closer to her body.

“No, no, listen… she’s really strong,” Erend says. “She retains new moves better and faster than anyone I’ve ever worked with. She’s incredibly tough – made of Oseram steel – and right now, it won’t take her long before she can hold her own against one of mine.”

Aloy looks back at him. “You mean that?”

“Every single word,” he says. “I would never lie to you, Aloy.”

She nods, letting her attention drift back to the boars as she chews on the inside of her cheek. Erend’s words don’t seem to dissolve the threads of her fears but… they add a balm to it. Of course Elisabet is strong – GAIA made her that way.

Still mulling over what happened inside the palace earlier, a sliver of doubt and suspicion slips between Aloy’s thoughts. The way Vanasha reacted after she’d spoken with Saranah – how she mentioned Aloy’s ‘secrets,’ as if she felt the need to mention leverage…

Was her interest in Elisabet earlier genuine or was it all just a ploy to gain information?

Aloy fidgets, picking away at a small scab on one of her knuckles. She trusts Vanasha to have her back in battle, to warn her of possible danger and help her understand the underhanded politics of Meridian if she needs to – but it doesn’t feel like her trust is returned the same way.

She can tell by the angle of Erend’s stance that he’s watching her.

“What else is bothering you?”

“You know I’m not looking for a mate, right?” she says instantly, glancing over when she’s rewarded with a sputtered, fire and spit, girl. “I know what the Vanguards say and I know what people think and – you know I’m not, I mean you’re impressive in a fight and all but I’m not – you know? There’s a right time and it’s not something I feel at this moment – I don’t even know what I would want in a mate, you know?”

Erend has taken a step back from the fence, shaking his head. “Please stop, Aloy,” he says, clearly fighting a grin. “You don’t have to explain – I’m aware of your feelings, or the uh, the not being there part of them.”

An invisible weight lifts from her shoulders. “Oh praise the Mother,” she breathes out.

“Didn’t take you for the religious type.”

“What?”

“Nothin’.” Erend coughs into his fist. “Anyway, ‘s that what’s bothering you? Did I do something to uh…”

She jerks her head side to side once, propping her chin up on her hand as she leans forward, resting her elbow on her knee. “Just thinking,” she says. “It seems so easy for some people to be a part of someone else – like it’s an inevitability.”

“Like there’s ropes pulling them towards each other.”
It’s an accurate description. What if that’s the driving force behind the longing in Saranah’s eyes? A thread that connects her and Ilima and keeps pulling on each end even as the distance between them grows.

Erend steps back up to her side again, less tension in his moves. “I’m not here because I want to try and shackle you, Aloy,” he says. “I’m here because you are a hammer made of the strongest materials our world has to offer, and by the forge, I would be so lucky as to be named your handle.

“You can always ask for my steel.” The lines in his face soften as his voice mells out. “Just know that you can lean on me too, if you need to.”

It’s not at all what she expected to hear and at the same time Erend’s words manage to sooth a sharp edge inside of her she hadn’t noticed before. “Thanks,” she says, tapping a hand against his shoulder and then – acting on a faint instinctive tug – leans in to rest her forehead against the edge where his leather armor meets the rough fabric of his sleeve.

She closes her eyes, breathing in the scent of smoke and, faintly but still there, ale.

Erend’s shoulder stiffens under her touch before it relaxes again and he says, tentatively, “You smell nice… like a noblewoman.”

Aloy groans, pressing her face deeper into his sleeve. “Like someone shoved me into a vat of perfume,” she grumbles, and Erend laughs, his body shifting.

“We can look for ways to fix that,” he says. “Maybe smuggle one of these boars up to the feast, or mark some of the houses with mud.”

“Or leave a stone at every door,” Aloy adds, sitting up straight in time to see Erend’s eyes light up.

Whatever else Erend wanted to suggest next is interrupted by a Focus message lighting up Aloy’s vision before Elisabet’s face comes into view. “Aloy,” the holo says as the image stabilizes.

“Elisabet, is something wrong?”

“Oh, no,” Elisabet answers immediately. “No, quite the opposite, actually. Something happened – something amazing.”

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G/M.A9 CORE LOG 841H

///

[myhost ~]% puzzle /var/log/sshd.log
January 2 14:27:09 myhost sshd[43553]: gaia_unix(sshd:session): session opened for user anonymous by (uid=1)
January 2 18:43:41 myhost sshd[43553]: gaia_unix(sshd:session): session closed for user anonymous

[user1@host ~]$ who
user1 tty1 3042-1-2 18:43 (73.79.62.174)
user1 location(approximate): 39.823956, -110.848681

///
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

My love to burbear for reading this chapter and always supporting me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gaia Log: 2 January 3042 – recording/prvt/aloy – STATUS: LOCKED

Elisabet: [...] and it is talking to us – communicating! It – or she, or they – MINERVA is reaching out and is handing us information, valuable info in regards to…

Aloy: A location?

Elisabet: Yes! It wouldn’t be without reason – why give information without an expectation behind it? That wouldn’t make sense.

GAIA: These coordinates correspond with a location you have visited last year, Aloy.

Aloy: Last – oh.

[Pause]

Aloy: I know how to get there.

Elisabet: Excellent!

Aloy: How soon do you want to leave?

Elisabet: How soon – I mean, right now?

[Pause]

Elisabet: Is that too…

GAIA: Aloy has not had time to rest since her return.

Elisabet: Shit, I’m sorry.

Aloy: No – we can go. I know of some shelter on the way, we can find some Striders, then ride out…

Elisabet: But – your friends, don’t you want to say goodbye to them? And if we leave in the morning, you can have breakfast first.

[Pause]

Aloy: I can write them a note. We should go. GAIA, can you get me the location on two Striders?
GAIA: Sending them your way.

Aloy: Great – let’s go.

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Gaia Log: 3 January 3042 – recording/prvt/elisabet – STATUS: LOCKED

Elisabet: She’s asleep, right?

GAIA: Yes, Elisabet.

Elisabet: God… I feel awful. Should have waited till morning before giving her the news. Who would have guessed that she’d…

GAIA: You are, in some ways, very similar.

Elisabet: That’s a nice way of putting it, GAIA.

[Pause]

Elisabet: Is she comfortable? Is she cold? Her forehead feels cold but she’s not shivering –

GAIA: Aloy is all right, Elisabet.

Elisabet: Christ, I got so caught up in everything I completely forgot and now we’re here and…

GAIA: Aloy has not shown signs of distress over leaving Meridian so shortly after her arrival. In the time I have gotten to know her, she very rarely expresses a need to linger in places. In fact, most often she does not ‘leave a note’ explaining her whereabouts when setting out.

Elisabet: Oh…

GAIA: You need not be upset, Elisabet.

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Gaia Log: 3 January 3042 – recording/prvt/aloy – STATUS: LOCKED

Aloy: […] those walls – that’s Sunfall, it’s where –

Elisabet: The Project Facility. I can still recognize it… sort of. The location and…

Aloy: I’ve been inside. It hasn’t been taken apart like some of the ruins I’ve found. It’s where you worked, right?

Elisabet: Yeah.

[Pause]

Elisabet: Didn’t think I’d see it again, let alone as a… city.

Aloy: Do you want to…
Elisabet: No. There’s nothing left for me down there.

---

The mountain paths past Sunfall are treacherous, with jagged edges and steep pitfalls lurking for unsuspecting travelers. There’s heat and dust, barren stretches of land paired off with dry bushes, until there’s actual greenery forming in the distance.

There is, by all means, a lack of everyday comforts that goes even beyond what can be found in the Jewel, but at the same time Aloy feels light – freed, in a way. The unrest in her head started to clear after they left Meridian. Now it’s just her and Elisabet and GAIA, the three of them against the challenges of the wilds.

This she can do. This is easy, her vigilance serving a clear purpose in keeping track of their surroundings.

Their Striders carry them across the land without complaints. They actually offered themselves when Aloy approached them – one of them being the Strider that accompanied her for most of her travels over the past few moons. The machine knows her cues well by now, responding to the slightest of commands.

It’s midday by the time they reach the greener parts of the land and evening when they set up camp east from the MINERVA facility. There’s no need to hunt – Aloy made sure to pack some of the food from the Carja’s feast before leaving – and together with Elisabet they create a fire quickly.

While looking for a rock to sit on, Aloy finds her Strider drawing closer instead of grazing with its companion. She holds her hand out to the machine, about to lead it back to the grassier parts of the area, when it lowers itself to the ground gently, folding its legs under its body. Blue eyes stare at her, then look over to the fire, then back at her.

Elisabet laughs at the other side of the campfire. “Someone is looking for attention.”

“Must be,” Aloy huffs, settling her hands on her hips as she observes the machine. They stare at each other until the Strider whirs, tilting its head up to her. Its eyes are just… blue light, but for some reason they almost seem to beg her.

“I do believe this particular machine has grown attached to you, Aloy,” GAIA offers.

Its head perks up when Aloy approaches it, petting the sides of it, followed by more mechanical noises.

“Fine,” Aloy says, rubbing a hand over one of its horns before carefully sitting down next to it, leaning against its flank. “Just don’t spook.”

The Strider seems pleased, and glancing across the flames shows Elisabet watching them with unabashed amusement.

“They’re fine creatures,” Elisabet says, kindling the fire with some dried grass. “They’ve come so far since those first designs.”

“And while I no longer directly influence any of their individual developments, I experience… pride in observing them,” GAIA answers, and Elisabet’s gaze drifts, no longer focused on anything in particular.

“Like children,” she says.
Aloy watches the flames, the embers that fly away from the fire. Quiet takes over as Elisabet and GAIA stop speaking. The moon shows itself through the roof of leaves above them, a silent light from afar.

They eat and rest, but Elisabet doesn’t mention sleep and Aloy is nowhere near tired herself. Closing in on a goal fuels her, driving her to her feet again.

“We should go,” she says and Elisabet nods.

They put out the fire and leave the Striders behind, setting out on foot. Aloy keeps a close watch on her Focus’ interface, searching for any machines hiding along the trees with them – though she finds none.

Vines and bushes have changed the landscape in small ways, but the entrance to the facility is still much the same. They climb down the debris into the half collapsed corridor, finding the triangular door at the end of it.

Elisabet stays close to her as she’s scanned and asked for her name and rank. The door opens, sliding shut once they’re inside.

“Genetic identity confirmed. Greetings, Dr. Sobeck and visitor.”

Aloy freezes in mid stride, causing Elisabet to brush up against her side.

“Aloy? Are you okay?”

She touches her Focus, scanning the room. Nothing appears to be different, but –

“It’s never done that before,” she whispers. She meets Elisabet’s eyes, seeing only mild confusion in the set of her brows, and gestures at the hall they’re in. “I have been here and it never announced a visitor.”

“Well, if you were visiting alone –”

“I wasn’t.”

Elisabet’s mouth closes and she turns, her eyes glowing blue briefly. “The facility is running in low-power mode, but I don’t see any external abnormalities. Maybe it read my Focus’ signal.”

Maybe, but it doesn’t strike Aloy as particularly likely. Then again, it could work like that. Even after having had one for most of her life, the Focus device is still a thing she’s had to figure out by herself – without the help of someone who truly understood its workings.

Elisabet moves past her, opening the door leading further into the facility. “I’ve never been here in person but... it held up well enough I suppose.”

Staring after her a moment longer, Aloy scans the room once more just to be sure she hasn’t missed something. She opens the Focus’ interface. “GAIA, can you keep an eye out for anything that’s... different?”

“Of course, Aloy.”

She heads through the door, finding Elisabet next to one of the consoles, her hand touching the side of it. Her face is frozen, only her eyes shifting minutely to follow a holo only she can see. Aloy’s own Focus tags the message the console projects as Farewell.
“Oh Sean.” Elisabet’s voice is strained. “You never got out. I’m so…” She sighs, her hand dropping from the console, turning her back to Aloy.

Aloy doesn’t bother listening to it herself – she remembers the gist of the message well enough from when she first saw it with Avad. “You knew him,” she says when the silence grows too heavy to bear any longer.

“I knew all of them, Aloy,” she says, softly, turning back around. “They were my people, but… before that, I was one of his. He taught me a lot, he was… kind… and generous. Went above and beyond.”

“I’m sorry.”

The way Elisabet inhales looks like a shudder, and for a split second Aloy believes her eyes to be wet – but it’s just a trick of the light. “Me too, Aloy,” she says. “Me too.”

She can’t think of anything to say that will comfort Elisabet. They inspect the room, Elisabet touching other consoles and bringing them to life while Aloy tries to find anything useful in her scans. She’s hesitant to go through the next door, now knowing the people they may come across are all from Elisabet’s past.

Aloy is about to ask for suggestions, anything in particular they could be looking for, when GAIA comes to their rescue.

“I have found an irregularity,” she tells them, opening a map of the facility on Aloy’s Focus. A red dot appears, marking one of the smaller rooms. “The marker indicates a place that is drawing more power than expressly necessary.”

“Alright!” Elisabet straightens from the console she was looking at. “That’s more like it. Let’s take a look.”

Even though Elisabet’s taking to the next door with large strides, Aloy finds a pang of worry in the pit of her stomach. There’s something in her voice, something in the tense set of her jaw that doesn’t align with the energy she’s trying to project – like it’s an act put on for an audience, but there’s no one else around.

Aloy follows her into the lower parts of the facility, feels the chill on her arms as they descend. GAIA must have given the map to Elisabet as well as they’re headed directly towards the smaller room.

The door is already ajar, white light pouring through the opening. The metal sides of the door slide into the wall with ease, and the source of the light is revealed. A brightly lit screen welcomes them, dark letters showing a message.

**INTRUSION IDENTIFY**

Aloy is suddenly more aware of her heart pounding in her chest. Is this it? Is this MINERVA?

She can hear Elisabet exclaim *oh, wow*, before the woman moves past her, sitting down on the ancient chair next to the table in front of the screen.

The detached feeling that comes over her is accompanied by the memories of HEPHAESTUS in Firebreak and HADES – both of them defending themselves with violent measures and… why would MINERVA be any different?
She glances around with her Focus but there’s no danger, no imminent threat. No cables humming with excess energy or blocking exits. There’s only a bright screen with a message and Elisabet dusting away debris from a rectangular board with square buttons. Her Focus marks it as a keyboard.

“Here we go,” Elisabet mutters, setting the board back down on the table. “You ready, Aloy? C’mere, come closer.”

“Sure,” she says, swallowing. Her throat is parched and she reaches for her waterskin, taking a few cautious steps forward until she’s standing next to Elisabet.

Elisabet presses a single key on the board and the message disappears, showing four new lines of text instead and a single, blinking vertical line.

```plaintext
FIRST NAME: |
LAST NAME:

FIRST NAME: |
LAST NAME:
```

“The signal connected to this device is remote,” GAIA interrupts. “I am unable to track down its exact location.”

“I figured,” Elisabet answers. “No reason to show everything on a first date. Okay – let’s get this started.”

Elisabet’s fingers tap away on the keyboard too fast for Aloy to see which buttons she’s pressing, but when she looks back up letters have appeared, spelling out Elisabet’s name.

```plaintext
FIRST NAME: E-L-I-S-A-B-E-T
LAST NAME: S-O-B-E-C-K

FIRST NAME: |
LAST NAME:
```

“Oh, crap,” Elisabet says, her fingers stilling. She looks at Aloy, her eyes reflecting the white light of the screen. “Did you want to – I mean, you can do that yourself. Have you ever – ?”

Aloy shakes her head as she’s offered the keyboard. “I use the Focus for most things in the ruins. Most of the time.”

She leans in, looking at the small blocks, each assigned a letter or symbol. It’s not that different from what her Focus uses to type out messages. There’s an ‘O’ and a ‘Y,’ the symbols used to write the rest of her name.

Elisabet presses a button on the left side of the board and the blinking line jumps to the line below it, the one marked ‘last name.’ Aloy’s hands freeze.

“Last name and surname are the same thing,” Elisabet murmurs next to her.

But she doesn’t have one of those.

“Sure you do,” Elisabet says when she mentions it, leaning her elbow on one of the sides of the chair, resting her chin in her hand. Aloy can tell she’s observing her, gauging her reactions. “If you wanted, that is. It’s up to you.”
“‘Sobeck?’” she guesses, and Elisabet inclines her head slightly. “But… I’m not…”

“Oh, but you are.” She reaches out with one hand, tapping her fore and middle finger on Aloy’s collarbone. “In there,” she reaches up, tenderly touching her fingertips to Aloy’s temple, “and in here. Same genetic code, same family bloodline. If anything I’d say you hold more claim to it than I do at the moment, and I’m not getting rid of it. It’s completely up to you though.”

Aloy’s hand nudges towards the ‘S,’ pausing just as she’s about to press it. What would Rost think of this? Would he disapprove? Would he be indifferent? He knew how much she had wanted to meet her mother, had supported her throughout her training for the Proving…

He would want her to be happy.

She presses in the right keys, spelling out ‘Sobeck’ on the screen. Aloy Sobeck.

The letters disappear, new lines of text taking their place.

SUBJECT: Sobeck, Elisabet
IDENTITY: Alpha Prime
STATUS: DECEASED

SUBJECT: Sobeck, Aloy
MARKER: #LK1A1-4510
IDENTITY: Alpha Prime
STATUS: ALIVE

SUBJECT: Sobeck, Elisabet
MARKER: Multipurpose Servitor
STATUS: ACTIVE

SECURITY QUESTION NECESSARY

Elisabet lets out a choked laugh. “Ouch, my feelings. You don’t beat around the bush, do you?”

The screen renews itself, presenting a long string of digits, letters, and symbols.

IF 8888 = 8, 4444 = 4, LK1A1 = 1, BEAT = 3, BUSH = 2, FEELINGS = 0, THEN:
FEBRUARY 2 3042 = ?

Aloy squints at the text. “It’s a puzzle?” she says, looking over at Elisabet for confirmation.

She nods. “It’s a row of equations and if we figure out what they have in common, why four times eight is equal to eight, why bush is equal to two, we can use that knowledge to find the answer to the last one.”

“Right.”

“So if we take the first one – that’s four identical recipients being given a combined worth of eight, so that’s…”

Aloy glances back at Elisabet only to find her giving her an expectant look, making a hand motion as if to say, go on. “The eights aren’t eights – I don’t know. If this is MINERVA and that’s the puzzle we’re given, clearly it can hear us.”
“I have come to a possible solution, Elisabet,” GAIA joins in, but before Aloy can ask her to please tell them, Elisabet says, “That’s great, GAIA. However I’d like to solve this with Aloy.”

Why couldn’t it have been four dials and a poem about a bird’s flight patterns depending on the season?

Aloy groans, resting her hands face down on the table.

“Alright,” Elisabet says, one eyebrow raised. “Four identical recipients worth eight combined, meaning their individual worth is a total of two. The fours are similar except they’re only worth a total of one individually – and feelings, apparently, aren’t worth anything, but in bush there’s at least one letter with a maximum value of two. What does that tell us?”

While all the words leaving Elisabet’s mouth are ones Aloy can understand normally, the way they’re combined now dazzles her. Why wouldn’t a four just be a four? And if a four can be a one, how can an eight be a two?

*What does that even mean?*

She looks at the screen, taking all the different words and numbers in once more. There’s a tension building behind her forehead, slowly pushing against the inside of her skull. She huffs, pointing at the screen. “It tells me numbers aren’t really numbers, and letters aren’t really letters, and *maybe* it’s just playing a game with us.”

Elisabet is beaming. “That’s right – we’re supposed to look *beyond* the facade of what we’re given and disregard any preconceptions, and – Aloy, what are you doing?”

Taking her spear from her back, Aloy gives the override component a good once-over, rubbing away the dust and stray flecks of mud. “If it won’t let us in, maybe I can –”

“No! Put that back.”

“Ugh.”

Elisabet sighs, rubbing a hand over her face. “You’re tired, I get that. Okay. You’re on the right track though. If you look at an eight not as a digit, but as a shape, what is it made of?”

“… two circles.”

“And what does a four have?”

“Zero circles.”

“But a single enclosed space instead of two. And the B in bush has...”

“Two not-circles,” Aloy says, holding her face in her hands and letting her fingers pull down her lower eyelids.

“And there you go, you’ve solved the puzzle.”

Aloy stops squishing her own face.

*Oh.*

The shapes of BUSH have two enclosed spaces, the shapes of BEAT three – FEELINGS has none and LK1A1 has only one. She runs her eyes over FEBRUARY 2 3042, silently counting the B, the
Aloy reads the lines again, trying to find a double meaning or hostile intentions behind them. She can hear Elisabet say it was a joke behind her and GAIA responding with an affirmative.

MINERVA isn’t hostile.

She releases a tense breath, reaching out with one hand to fade through the holo sigil. “Hi there,” she says softly, almost like talking to a recently overridden machine.

GREETINGS Sobeck, Aloy, the screen says. BEFRIEND – VERB?

“Yes.” Aloy finds herself nodding. “I want us to be friends. All of us,” she says, looking over at Elisabet, knowing GAIA is most certainly still listening too.

FIRST : HELP – VERB.
SIBLING – NOUN.
DANGER – NOUN.

A set of coordinates follows – ones Aloy hasn’t seen before, but Elisabet leans in next to her. “I know where that is.”

All light in the room disappears, both Aloy and Elisabet pulling back from the screen instantly. The only sound left is that of breathing, sharp and brief. Afterimages of the lights have burned themselves into Aloy’s vision and she blinks quickly, seeing Elisabet pull the keyboard towards her and tap different keys.

“I can no longer find any trace of MINERVA’s presence,” GAIA says over their Focuses’,
confirming what they’re seeing before them.

“MINERVA’s gone,” Elisabet adds. “In an instance – without a trail to follow. Self-defense as first priority…”

Aloy watches the screen carefully, using both her eyes and her Focus. She’s about to ponder out loud what would make the sub-machine flee when there’s a crackle of static as a new holo pops up.

The shape of a man slowly forms in the darkened room of the facility.

Sylens’ cold eyes find Aloy’s. “We meet yet again.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone -- I don't think I've said much about this on here, if at all. My grandmother has been very ill over the course of 2018 and everyone in our family has been spending more time with her, helping her get affairs in order and all. She passed away January 1st. Her funeral went just the way she wanted. I think she'd be very pleased if she's up there looking down on us.

Looking back, 2018 was a very busy year for a multitude of reasons. I'm finally feeling more grounded and have been doing a lot more writing, although on more projects than just Second Dawn. The next chapter is almost done tho c;

If you're still here -- thank you for not giving up on me. <3
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

My inbox is empty and my heart is full! After spending two months on slowly answering all of your (amazing and kind and wonderful) comments, I can finally say I've gotten back to all of you. <3 Thank you for your patience!

I wanted to give you all a small life update from my end. I've been very busy over the past few months. I've started working on multiple new and exciting projects and have been getting more organized (as a habit!) over these past few months. Who said New Year's resolutions don't work? Hahah c: but in all honesty, I've been forging new life habits to take better care of my physical and mental health, and I'm starting to see the results of putting in that daily effort.

I even have a backlog of one (1) finished chapter at this moment c;

If any of you are interested in this sort of stuff, there's a youtuber called Rowena Tsai who makes these incredible videos about taking care of yourself. It's so important to be kind to yourself, especially when things are tough, and especially if you are a perfectionist or feel like you need to achieve (personal) goals all the time it's good to remember to sometimes do nothing. As with all things in life, you cannot continually spend energy without recharging.

I hope you are all doing well <3

Much love to burbear for proofreading <3 you're a star!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You.”

The accusation rolls off Aloy’s tongue without complaint. Every part of her bristles as she watches Sylens’ casual posture – the sureness with which he projects himself. It hasn’t been that long since he turned his back on her, again.

Besides, there’s only one thing he’d consider before contacting her – a way to make Aloy do his bidding.

They both know it, and neither seems willing to make the first move this time – to ask something of the other.

A squeak fills their quiet battle from the sidelines as Elisabet pushes herself away from the desk. “Oh hey there, Sylens,” she says. Like it’s nothing.

Aloy watches her from the corner of her eyes, finding the careful mask of Elisabet Sobeck firmly in place. This isn’t how Aloy usually sees her – relaxed to the point of coming across nonplussed. Her eyebrows form a flat line above her eyes, her head tilted just so to the side. There’s even the hint of a pleasant smile lying on the edges of her mouth.

“It’s nice to see you again,” Elisabet continues. “Thanks for helping Aloy save my ass last time.”
Sylens nods in her direction. “Elisabet.”

“Not – Dr. Sobeck? After all we’ve been through…”

“You do not *deserve* that title.”

Aloy feels a rope tighten like a noose around her innards, the heat of anger burning inside them. Somehow Sylens always manages to make her wish it was possible to strangle a holo image.

She can’t be the only one to carry that sentiment, not when Elisabet leans forward in her chair with a look on her face Aloy remembers from her talks with Ted.

“I was twenty when I earned my doctorate and as long as I hold those memories you can address me as such,” she says. “Or do you feel my equal after learning GAIA’s secrets from the vaults of her knowledge. You hacked her, after all.”

_Hacked?_

A quick look back at Sylens gives Aloy nothing, his face impassive as ever. Maybe even more than usual now he’s trying to stare Elisabet down. Aloy knows what ‘hack’ means – or she thinks she does, having learned of the term through different datapoints. Whatever it entails precisely, it’s bad news. Did he find a way to dig into GAIA’s system?

“Only you didn’t.” Elisabet scoots the chair forward a bit, leaning her elbows on her knees as she tilts her head up to the holo. “See, here’s the difference between you and me. I actually know what I’m doing with GAIA because I designed her. You just poke things with a stick and hope it’ll lead you to some form of reward.

“So next time you ponder *browsing GAIA’s archives*, you’d do well to remember which one of us earned that doctorate. And you can show me some respect.”

Taking a step towards them himself, Sylens sneers. “You are nothing but a machine, created by GAIA under the false impression of bringing back its maker –”

“Yeah, well done,” Elisabet throws back immediately. “You figured it out, fucking ace detective work there – stop wasting our time and get to the point, Sylens.”

Even through the holo’s image Aloy can see the fire in his eyes, and she’s glad he isn’t physically in the room with them.

“I have nothing more to say to you, *servitor* –”

Aloy strikes the end of her spear on the metal floor, the sound ringing through the room. “Enough! You –” she points her spearhead at Sylens, “– there’s something you need, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Say it or leave.”

His nostrils flare. For a long pause it seems like he might actually go and give them nothing. “There is a priest,” he says, the furrow of his eyebrows suggesting the words coming out take him by surprise, too. “A Cultist. He has gathered all Bahavas’ lost followers and given them a purpose – to heal the Buried Shadow.”

“That’s – impossible,” Aloy stutters, her heart fluttering in her chest. “I stopped HADES, there’s no way to heal him from what I did.”

Sylens bares his teeth, smirking. “Think rationally, Aloy – these people are blind to the truth, they
only see what they want to observe. If they wish to believe their Buried Shadow is somehow still alive, they’ll find a way to make it so.”

“Confirmation bias,” Elisabet says, not really looking at either of them. “Anything to avoid the cognitive dissonance they’d experience when faced with the mortality of their god.”

“So they found something else to worship – a different entity, a…” An idea comes over her and it feels like a part snapping into place. She looks at Sylens. “A different sub-function. That’s it, isn’t it? Your revelation.”

There’s no way to tell if the pleased set of his eyes is due to smugness or pride. “My discovery. The Cultists have made their way into a cauldron in Oseram territory, but not by force. They were invited in.”

Aloy raises her brows. That seems unlikely, especially given her own experiences. “HEPHAESTUS hates humans. They’re a threat to all machines – why give them access to a cauldron?”

“Except HEPHAESTUS isn’t in command anymore,” Sylens says. “The Cultists have found a way to use the cauldron to suit their own needs – creating machines with a certain temperament, somehow ingraining them with different goals.”

Remembering the newer machines, Aloy’s own words come flooding back to haunt her. So they really were built to attack for sport, spreading violence the sake of violence.

“But why?” she asks. “How are machines going to help them restore their ‘god?’ Are they still trying to kill me for who I am?”

“I’m not here to stroke your ego into thinking you are of that much importance to the cult,” Sylens retorts. “I have heard of a second location that might be of interest to both of us.”

“And you want me to head over and risk my life for whatever scraps of information lie there. Got it.”

“Only because I have other matters to attend to.”

Aloy snorts.

Right.

Raising one of his hands, Sylens activates his Focus’ menu and sorts through unseen data. “These are the coordinates.”

Aloy looks at them – catches Elisabet doing the same as GAIA shares the information with her, no doubt – and stifles her first response. She’s seen these numbers only moments before Sylens contacted them.

Instead she closes the message and pulls her shoulders back. “Guess I’ll go… risk my life.”

“No clever remarks? No comments of laziness?” Sylens’ eyes narrow and this time Aloy can tell for sure – smug. “One might think you’re learning.”

The holo blinks out of existence, leaving Aloy with one last unsaid comment in her already opened mouth. “Arrogant fuck,” she grumbles instead.

A choked laugh turns her attention to Elisabet, who’s holding one hand in front of her face, the back of her fingers pressed against her lips. “That’s one way to put it,” she says, sounding more and more
like her usual self.

“He shouldn’t have said those things.”

Elisabet waves her off. “Oh – it’s fine, really.”

It isn’t, but before Aloy can make that clear GAIA speaks up.

“MINERVA is here.”

The screen comes to life again, showing MINERVA’s logo as an indication of the sub-function’s presence. SILENCE, appears in white text on the dark backdrop. UNTRUSTWORTHY – ADJECTIVE.

“We know,” Aloy says, a part of her so very relieved MINERVA seems to have a good sense of self preservation. “Sylens uses others to get what he wants.”

He’s even willing to kill for it.

GIFT – VERB. INFORMATION – NOUN.

---

G/M.A9 – information/sylens/005

SYLENS: […] knowing I’m not motivated by the desire to beat others, but the desire to achieve. They refuse to see that which is right before them, their innate desires making them yearn for safety.

[pause]

SYLENS: Fools. Breeding stupidity and compliance into the next generations of our existence.

[pause]

SYLENS: They should see the harm they cause – the price of ignorant bliss, to work without ever questioning why. That is what I do. Asking the universe to explain itself, demanding answers.

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G/M.A9 – information/sylens/068

SYLENS: […] to achieve greatness one must be willing to sacrifice, and to sacrifice –

[unintelligible sounds]

SYLENS: – one must persevere. Now stay put. I must gather more twine for this.

---

G/M.A9 – information/sylens/147

SYLENS: […] to imagine I believed for one moment in the impossibility of it all. How my feelings betrayed me. Contradictions do not exist – of course she was not real.

[pause]
SYLENS: But why would GAIA bother… to pretend Dr. Sobeck is alive. The servitor could easily function as a mouthpiece if it was looking for a physical form. All data is available to GAIA regardless, the pretense is unnecessary. Smart machine… stupid machine. Why bother with the emotions?

[pause]

SYLENS: Never alive in the first place. Dr. Sobeck will keep her secrets. Death outsmarts us all.

---

They’ve been listening to Sylens’ recordings for two days now – while on their Striders, while they’re eating, even before going to sleep. MINERVA has gifted them a cauldronful of the things Sylens ponders when he’s alone. Most of it is as dull as the desert they’re crossing.

Sand blows against Aloy’s face, making her shield her eyes and raise her shawl further, covering her nose and mouth. Even while sitting on top of a dune, her sight is limited to only seeing a few feet in front of her.

The sky itself has an orange hue to it – a warning for anyone reckless enough to be outside. There’s a mountain range in the distance, but the only reason Aloy is able to find the faint outline is because GAIA and Elisabet told her of its existence.

She heads back for the cave they found earlier, letting herself in past the tarp they hung over the entrance. Given how much shelter they usually have it’s a cozy hideout, the small fire by the opening offering some light and warmth while their things are kept further in the cave.

Aloy shakes her head, pulling her shawl down and tugging on it in an attempt to dislodge the copious amounts of sand held in its folds. “Damn dust,” she mutters. “Like it’s under my skin.” She’ll have to undress later to be fully rid of it, but now’s not the time. Maybe when they’re somewhere inside… or at least in a different stretch of land. Trees would be nice.

Elisabet and her Strider are right where Aloy left them – huddled together against the back wall of the cave. The machine had once again insisted on staying close and for some reason it’s getting harder to refuse the Strider.

Even now the machine is looking at her, almost like it’s giving her a small welcome.

“Yeah, yeah, keep it up.” Aloy pats the Strider’s horns in passing before sitting down next to Elisabet, leaning against the machine’s side. “If you stick around any longer I might as well give you a name.”

The machine whirs quietly. Is it agreeing with her?

Elisabet looks up, touching her Focus briefly. She must’ve still been listening to Sylens’ audio entries. “Aragorn,” she says.

“Excuse me?”

Her nose wrinkles and she seems amused by something. “A Strider called Aragorn.”

It’s a terrible name. It’s… horrendous. “Gorn is a good Nora name. Anything Ara is almost always Carja – but those two together, that’s like… mates who couldn’t decide on one name.”

Elisabet shrugs. “I still like it – but hey, your Strider.”
The fire at the entrance flickers as a gust of wind passes by. Aloy wets her lips, getting a lick of dust for her troubles. She reaches for her waterskin and takes a restrained sip from it.

“I’m no good with names,” she admits. One of the first dolls Rost crafted for her had simply been called ‘doll’ and been used as target practice in secret. “Doesn’t seem like the storm will let up any time soon,” she adds. “No machines out there, though.”

Elisabet hums softly, her Focus lighting up again. “We can wait it out for a bit. Get through some more logs.”

“Anything interesting?”

Tilting her head to the side, Elisabet looks at her – then rolls her eyes a little. “He’s very intelligent. Absolutely magnificent. I think he might be the only human alive who knows what it’s like to have a thought.”

A great number of Sylens’ inner thoughts are just that – small observations. GAIA tried to help them out by scanning them for words that might indicate something of importance going on. Some of them are fairly short, but others…

Aloy grimaces, not looking forward to resuming their shared burden. “One of his thoughts was twenty minutes about the different consistencies of blaze. It didn’t sound like he was doing anything, just… talking.”

This time Elisabet’s smile is a little sad. “He must be lonely. Might not even want to admit it to anyone.”

Touching her own Focus marks the cave with a network of purple lights. Aloy scrolls through the long list of audio files, making her way to where she was. “You’re not sad for him, are you?” she asks. “I think he just likes hearing his own voice. After all, he must be better than anyone else because he’s asking the universe to explain itself.”

They had both listened to the message containing Sylens’ thoughts on Elisabet and how he considers her to be just another part of GAIA. The memory alone is enough to make her feel angry on Elisabet’s behalf again. Somehow it bothers Aloy more when he talks about Elisabet like that than when he calls her self-centered or ignorant or any of the other terms he comes up with.

When he says it to her it’s him being a blasted piece of Glinthawk carcass – like he always is – but even if Elisabet won’t admit it, Aloy can tell Sylens’ words struck some inner part of her. A part that made her a little more withdrawn over the past few days.

If there’s anyone who doesn’t deserve Elisabet’s sympathy, it’s Sylens – and Aloy vows not to give him her own.

Elisabet doesn’t answer.

The next audio file on Aloy’s list is a short one – Sylens marks the date and time, and how he’s been gathering supplies. He doesn’t say what for and ends the message by mentioning it would be more useful if he had a machine to do his bidding. Aloy tells GAIA to add it to the unimportant ones.

“Kadmilus,” Elisabet says out of nowhere, turning to Aloy. “A descendant of the Greek god Hephaestus. Wouldn’t that be a fitting name?”

Mulling it over, Aloy tries the name for herself. “‘Kadmilus.’ It’s long.”
“Nothing wrong with that.”

She turns to the Strider, petting its horns again. “Kadmilus. What do you think, huh?”

The Strider’s eyes are blue and it makes another whirring sound – which is the closest to approval of a name a Strider can give, Aloy supposes. Do Striders even care what they’re called?

“See?” Elisabet says. “It likes the name.”

Aloy snorts, laughing outright when GAIA comes on and adds, “I do not think Striders, or any machines created by HEPHAESTUS, hold opinions on being given a name,” and Elisabet counters it by saying it matters to us, okay?

She makes it through most of her next audio file without paying a lot of attention, chuckling a few more times before being able to put it all behind her. That’s when a single word from Sylens makes her regret only listening with half an ear.

‘Rabashad.’

Rewinding the message, Aloy listens to Sylens repeating himself.

‘These savages listen to a single man, a priest – Rabashad. Taking over right where Bahavas left off. He must have been waiting for his moment to shine in Sunfall long before Aloy showed up, the dedication he shows through his endeavors –’

A priest! Keshad was rambling about a priest – of the Eclipse!

The excited tug in her stomach over figuring out what Keshad had been talking about fades quickly, making way for nausea. If Rabashad is the new Bahavas, it means the Cultists have recovered from the loss of their leader and god.

Is that why they’re controlling a cauldron? To find a way to bring HADES back? Is that why they’re still trying to kill her, because of HADES’ orders? Because she stopped them? Is she somehow still responsible for all the violence that has happened since the Battle for the Spire?

And why didn’t Sylens warn her?

Although that last question is easily answered: because he doesn’t care about giving her all the details – he never has, before.

Marking the file as important, Aloy swallows while trying to get rid of the nerves bouncing in her stomach. “Elisabet, I think I found something.”

---

The decision to leave while the sandstorm is still active is quickly made.

“MINERVA said one of the other sub-functions was in danger at those coordinates,” Elisabet says, already packing their things with quick, precise movements. “Now that that cult is involved for sure, we shouldn’t idle here. Who knows what they’re doing.”

Gathering the arrowheads she crafted last night, Aloy fidgets with one of them in her right hand before putting it away. “You said it’s an abandoned facility yourself. I’m not sure how much they’d be able to do without – me. Or GAIA.”

She moves over to the fire, putting it out by smothering the flames with sand. Elisabet said not to
worry about their sight being next to nothing out there – that she doesn’t technically need her eyes to 
see, especially not when they have Kadmilus and the other Strider to guide them as well.

Aloy still worries. Sandstorms are able to change the entire look of a place over the course of hours. 
It’s not that she hasn’t traveled through one before – it’s that she has. Getting lost is too easy, and out 
here in the Forbidden West she isn’t sure how quickly she can find her way again.

And then there’s the fact that sand and dust gets everywhere – it was bad enough when she went 
outside earlier, but the winds seem to have only picked up since. She’s heard plenty of tales of 
travelers less fortunate who were buried alive.

She mentions this to Elisabet, who gives her a pat on the shoulder before starting to tie half their 
belongings onto Kadmilus’ back.

“We can run out of water, too,” she says in a gentle tone of voice. “Aloy – there’s no telling how 
long we’ll be stuck here if we try to wait it out. I might not need to drink or eat or sleep, but you do.”

They end up tying Kadmilus and the other Strider to each other while planning to sit on Kadmilus 
together. Aloy can’t do much to help, already busy using as little water as possible wetting the part of 
her shawl that’ll cover her mouth and nose. Next she uses Elisabet’s shawl to cover her ears, eyes, 
and as much of her as possible after that.

Elisabet helps her climb onto Kadmilus before joining her in front, shielding her from some of the 
sandy winds. Her arms find their way around Elisabet’s middle and Elisabet helps hide them in the 
folds of her jacket, protected against the onslaught of dust.

Thankfully Elisabet’s body is a source of heat, as always, and Aloy presses her covered cheek 
against her back, feeling the warmth seep through layers of fabric. Kadmilus’ strides are confident as 
the machine takes them further west.

Not being able to guide their journey instills a deep sense of wrongness – or perhaps that’s common 
sense kicking in. In the few moments before Aloy tied the shawl in front of her eyes, she saw 
Elisabet step outside. She could see her eyes were closed but there was no change in the way she 
moved.

Even now she notices the way Elisabet holds her breath – or just… doesn’t breathe at all.

Aloy squeezes her eyes shut, guiding all her concentration to stay calm while the outside world rages 
against them. Every time Kadmilus takes a step that feels slightly off, her heart jitters inside her chest.

Her Focus buzzes quietly before Elisabet’s voice comes on without her actually speaking out loud. 
“It’s okay,” she tells her. “We’re on track. How’re you holding up? Tap my side once for good, 
twice for bad.”

It’s smart of her to include some way Aloy can answer when any words spoken would either be lost 
to the winds or give her some dust to chew on, even with the wet cloth in place. Aloy lifts her hand 
beneath Elisabet’s jacket, tapping her side once.

“I know this isn’t ideal but… we can reach the coordinates before the end of the day. Maybe it won’t 
make a difference, but maybe it does and I… I don’t want to risk it. Do you understand?”

Aloy taps her side once.

“I can’t help but feel like I’m dragging you along. I would never have done this in… my world. The 
world before. Somehow I know we’ll be okay. You and me and GAIA. And Kadmilus, of course.
It’s like I can feel the odds and just know… I know where to go. Like there’s something reaching out to me from a distance. I’m not sure how to explain it.”

Maybe this is a part of GAIA’s gift to Elisabet – the instinct machines have when it comes to locations and routes. Either way Aloy wants to tell Elisabet it’s fine, that she trusts her more than anyone, and she tightens her arms around her.

She can hear a smile in Elisabet’s voice when she speaks next. “I wouldn’t be doing this if I felt it would put you at risk any more than we already are.”

Sand scrapes against her like stone, her hearing overwhelmed by the howling of the desert the moment Elisabet’s voice falls away. They’ll get through this. One way or another.

It’s hard to tell time after a while when everything starts to blur together – the howls, the strides, the rhythmic beatings of Elisabet’s mechanical heart.

Elisabet’s voice comes on again, soft and almost uncertain. “I can tell you a story, if you’d like.”

She taps her side once.

---

Gaia Log: 6 January 3042 – recording/prvt/aloy – STATUS: LOCKED

Elisabet: I never had a child in my time. Never had a chance to… well. Never had a chance. Maybe that’s for the best – I’m not sure things would’ve turned out quite the same if I’d had one to look after when… when the world fell to pieces. But my mother, she always said children show you the ways in which you fail. The ways in which you can grow.

Elisabet: How it’s never too late to stop learning. Some people believe that there’s a point where your brain loses all elasticity and you’re unable to retain anything new. My mother – she disagreed. Vehemently. She made a point of going through my old textbooks once I was done with them, so she could hold a conversation on my level.

Elisabet: I didn’t consider how special that was, in a way, until much later. The lengths she’d go to understand me. She never treated me like I was in any way less than her, and when she was wrong about something… she’d apologize. Explain to me why she was wrong.

Elisabet: She was… someone special. I know I’ve probably said it before but she’d… she’d have loved you. I’m sure she would’ve taken up archery lessons to stay on top of your interests, too. I bet she would’ve given you the best spot on the couch on movie night. Spoiled you rotten.

[pause]

Elisabet: I’m just being nostalgic, I suppose. Wishing for a time that’s so far out of my reach. Doesn’t really make for a good story – oh –

[pause]

Elisabet: Well if you say it is, then I guess it must be so.

GAIA: Elisabet often says her stories are ‘not very good.’ I disagree, too.

Elisabet: Now you’re both just trying to flatter me.
They eventually pass through the last of the sandstorm, leaving the scraping winds behind. The mountain range on the horizon is much closer now, the trees and other greenery leading up to the steep and rocky peaks finally visible.

No more sand! Aloy sighs a breath of relief at the sight. “Can’t wait to bathe somewhere,” she says to Elisabet, who chuckles.

Kadmilus and the other Strider made it through the sandstorm alright, though there’s the odd sound of crunching when they move certain joints. They might have to look into that later. Most of their belongings are still tied to them, although one smaller bag appears to be missing.

“I think that was… the berries from the forest,” Elisabet says after thinking on it. “Some rope. The potions you made –”

“No, I have those right here,” Aloy interjects, patting one of her pouches. If that’s all they lost she’ll count it as a win. It could’ve been much worse. If they need more food she can always hunt for it.

Elisabet guides Kadmilus closer to one mountain in particular. “This was supposed to be the E-9 Cradle facility,” she explains softly. They’re still more than an hour away and the sun is setting fast. “Everything was in place when things fell apart in the literal sense. The foundation of the facility wasn’t stable enough and… we had to abandon it.”

Aloy has been to her share of unstable ruins, so she nods in understanding. “If that’s where the sub-function is hiding, it must be in some sort of shape.”

“It was too big of a risk to leave everything there. Too much damage.”

Still, HADES made do with the remnants of a Horus, HEPHAESTUS gladly cannibalized parts of the Firebreak facility, and MINERVA seemed to transfer from one location to another at a whim to avoid being found. Surely there are plenty of parts to be found inside the abandoned E-9 facility in order for a different sub-function to survive.

There’s a small clearing near a body of water clean enough to drink, and Aloy gladly dismounts from Kadmilus in order to start building a quick camp. With no other machines nearby, Aloy starts gathering stones to form a circle in the middle of their setup when Elisabet shakes her head.

“No fire. We have no idea who’s nearby,” she says, then sees the look Aloy is giving her. “Okay, maybe a small fire.”

With plenty of arrows in her quiver Aloy is sure they can handle whoever is foolish enough to cross them. Once everything is in place and she’s made sure there’s enough to eat for the night, Aloy walks up to Elisabet and the other Strider.

Elisabet is crouched near one of the front legs, her hands feeling around the plating that protects a lot of the Strider’s wires. She gives Aloy a little nod when she sees her approaching. “Going to the lake?”

“Yeah.” Aloy pats the Strider’s side. “I’ll take Kadmilus with me. Keep my Focus on in case there’s trouble.”

“A sound idea,” GAIA says, “even though the chances of anything happening while you are gone
Elisabet grimaces at what she’s doing, her hand coming away from the joint with more sand on it. “Right on. Well, don’t stay out too late. Remember to fill those waterskins.”

“Already ahead of you,” Aloy says, showing off the two skins hanging from her belt and Elisabet gives her the approving gesture of holding one thumb up. Aloy copies it, feeling a little silly while doing so, but it makes Elisabet grin and Aloy laughs in return.

She whistles for Kadmilus, the gentle trod of metal feet following her to the lake.

Chapter End Notes

See you in a few weeks! c:
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

I've been away from home for a few weeks, so I haven't been writing a whooole lot... but... nevertheless, here's the next chapter. Thank you everyone who is still with me after such a long time, and thank you to everyone who has recently started reading this story. It means the world to me. <3

As always, my eternal love to burbear! I've been nervous about this chapter for a while. Thank you for your support (and telling me to just post it <3)!

The water of the lake is cold but manages to do just what Aloy wants it to: get rid of the wretched sand stuck to every part of her body.

Kadmilus keeps a careful watch over her, the machine’s blue light dancing on the water’s surface. Aloy doesn’t take long, using only the time that is necessary to clean herself off before shaking out her clothes and getting dressed again.

Having already refilled the waterskins, Aloy is about to head back when she hears someone shouting in the distance and she freezes. It’s not Elisabet – the voice much too different, having almost a tinny quality to it. She crouches in the reeds, pressing one hand against Kadmilus’ side as if to calm the machine.

“Come on, let’s go,” the voice calls out, much closer to her this time. “Let’s go. The hunger keeps us sharp!”

There’s a loud whistle, like a bird, coming from somewhere up in the trees. Aloy touches her Focus, scanning the area while holding her breath. Nothing! No machines, no people, and yet…

“No food tonight,” the voice cries, followed by another whistle. “The hunger keeps us sharp! The hunger keeps us, let’s go!”

Following a strange tug of instinct, Aloy looks up and scans the treeline, finding a bird about the size of her lower arm there. It’s watching her with beady eyes, tilting its head to one side before opening its beak and…

Aloy isn’t sure if she’s still awake because the bird says, “Hello, stranger,” while observing her. The small black eyes keep looking at her, Kadmilus’ blue light reflecting off of them.

Scanning once more just to be sure and finding nothing, Aloy rises back to her feet. “Hello?” she says, not sure what to do now with a bird that’s speaking to her.

She holds her breath for another long, tense moment before the bird squawks, the sound of it loud and sudden enough to startle Aloy. Flapping its wings, the bird jumps off the branch and disappears into the night.

Waiting for a few more seconds, not hearing anything else, Aloy taps Kadmilus’ side. “We’re leaving,” she whispers to the machine, rewarding her with a whir of agreement before they move. Her heart thuds in her throat all the way to the camp.
“There’s a bird out there that speaks,” she says to Elisabet upon arrival, greeted by the sight of food being cooked on their small fire. “Like a person.”

“Like a parrot?” Elisabet asks, raising one of her eyebrows. “Or a cockatoo?”

Aloy motions for Kadmilus to stay at the edge of the camp before sitting down opposite Elisabet, on the other side of the fire. “If those are both birds, then, yes. Like those, I suppose.”

There’s a soft smile on Elisabet’s lips, a tender look Aloy has come to recognize as one of quiet wonder and gratitude. “You hear that, GAIA,” she murmurs, eyes darting towards her temple – her Focus glowing dimly. “Charles would be so pleased.”

“Yes, Elisabet,” GAIA answers. “I am certain he would have been elated.”

As much as it makes Aloy’s chest fill with warmth seeing Elisabet and GAIA both so happy over a small discovery, it doesn’t fully chase away the unease she feels herself. “So that’s – normal,” she says. “Some birds are able to speak.”

“Oh, um –” Elisabet shakes her head, her gaze settling on Aloy once more. “Yes. Some birds are known to repeat sounds and phrases they hear. Parrots and ravens and… well, all sorts of birds, they’re able to do that. Very intelligent creatures. Not all birds, but yeah, some of them. Did it say anything interesting?”

“It said ‘hello’ to me, I think,” Aloy says slowly.

Elisabet laughs, then turns her attention to the pot over the fire. “Hah! Classic.”

Staring into the flames, Aloy ponders the other words the bird used.

_The hunger keeps us sharp…_

The phrase is not unfamiliar to her. She remembers the Shadow Carja using it as a mantra trying to cope with the lack of rations. If the bird copies what it hears, then… but they’re miles from Carja territory. Either the bird has traveled far, or somehow the phrase made its way into the Forbidden West.

It sets her on edge, all of it – the lack of machines, the probability of running into people. What if there are birds listening to them, repeating their words to whoever else is out there? Lying in her hammock, Aloy is wide awake for most of the night, pretending to be asleep while Elisabet hums melodies of lost songs under her breath.

Dawn arrives not long after Aloy manages to drift off, and while packing their things Elisabet promises it won’t be much further until they reach the facility.

When they pass through a clearing of the trees, Elisabet points to one of the mountain peaks. “There,” she says. “At its foot, that’s where we need to be.”

Kadmilus whirs, shaking its head. “Quiet now,” Aloy says, hushing the machine. “We should be on our guard.”

She catches Elisabet looking at her. “Right,” she says, mood turning more somber. “No telling what – or who – we’ll find.”

As the landscape turns more barren, the heat comes back to spite them. While Elisabet and the Striders hardly seem affected, Aloy urges Kadmilus to stick to whatever cover they can find. She’s
already sweating and they have precious little water in these foreign lands. Getting sun-sick would be devastating.

Finally, after ages of silence, GAIA comes through their Focuses. “There is a strong signal of an unidentified source coming from the facility’s location,” she says.

The foot of the mountain is finally within reach, hidden away behind some rocky hillsides they’re yet to pass and some sparse bushes and trees.

Aloy wets her cracked lips, making eye contact with Elisabet. “That’s good. Means we’re not out here for nothing.”

Giving her a nod, Elisabet replies to GAIA, saying, “Keep us updated, alright? Anything out of the ordinary –” when a loud explosion coming from the site makes all four of them stop.

*There you have it*, Aloy thinks to herself. *Something out of the ordinary, right on time.* She drops down her Strider, motioning Elisabet to do the same.

“I am unable to sense to origin of that explosion,” GAIA says. “I can only assist you in small ways out here, I am afraid.”

“It’s fine, GAIA, you’re doing great,” Aloy says in an attempt to reassure the AI while pulling Kadmilus towards a patch of trees and bushes – one that seems like it could provide some means of shelter. A place to drop off supplies before investigating whatever made that sound.

She makes sure they keep an even pace so as not to alert anything that might be scanning. More explosions are heard, smaller ones this time. Like blaze. Or guns.

Her hunch to head over to the bushes pays off – there’s an abandoned shelter made of thick branches and leaves, a good enough spot to hide their belongings for now. Aloy’s hands shake as she takes down the packs from Kadmilus’ back, stowing them away.

*Quickly,* her blood urges her. *Be ready.*

She takes her spear and bow, counting the arrows in her quiver. There’s a fight out there and Aloy’s sure talking won’t do the trick. Hardpoint, precision, tearblast… she’s not planning on announcing their arrival too loudly, but these should be enough.

Next to her Elisabet has unloaded the other Strider, taking Aloy’s old bow from their supplies. They lock eyes for a second and Aloy swallows against whatever it is that’s growing in her throat.

She won’t be alone this time.

“Here,” she huffs, handing Elisabet some of the hardpoint arrows. “Don’t… shoot before it’s necessary. Should keep things quiet for as long as we can.”

Elisabet nods, taking the arrows from her. “I’ll follow your lead.”

---

Leaving the Striders behind is harder than usual, but not because of her or Elisabet. It’s Kadmilus who keeps trying to join them, forcing Aloy to physically bear all her weight against the machine and tell it sternly to *stay put.*

It seems the command has finally gotten through to the machine when it only looks at them,
watching the distance grow with its blue eyes.

“What’s wrong with it?” Aloy murmurs under her breath.

“Attachment,” Elisabet says next to her, softly. “It must feel safer by your side.”

Being together in a fight isn’t safe. If only the machine understood that it’s because Aloy doesn’t want it to die that she’s keeping it from joining them. She swallows her sentiments, turning on her Focus as they approach the explosions.

Sticking to the larger rocks along the hillside keeps them in cover for most of the time it takes to climb it. Once they’re at the top, they’re given a clear view of what’s happening at the foot of the mountain.

There’s a door, a big triangle of metal – same as all the others – and an encampment in front of it. Aloy squints, following the mess of wooden stakes and structures. It’s two camps they’re looking at, one of them behind a wall, blocking off the facility’s door, and the other surrounds all of it, spreading out into the wide rocky clearing.

What’s more peculiar is the lack of patrols, the lack of people in general. There’s old blood staining the rocks and sand, abandoned and broken weapons littering the field…

“It’s a battleground,” Elisabet whispers. “My god, they’re fighting here.”

She’s right. Looking more closely reveals piles of dead bodies on either side of the wooden wall, which is in rough shape itself. Parts of it have been blasted with fire weapons, leaving holes in the defenses – holes filled with whatever the other side had available, beams, tables, planks.

They’re too far away to find any human signatures hiding in the rubble with their Focuses. Aloy’s about to suggest moving closer when cries erupt from the grounds below, followed by more explosions.

It takes her a moment to locate their target – a few lone figures, dressed in the colors of sand, running through the rubble and towards the walls. Masked faces appear from the structures behind them, aiming bows and guns their way, shouting.

*Eclipse.*

There’s nothing Aloy can do but wait and watch as one by one the lone figures are shot down. Two of them make it past the barricade, but the Eclipse keep firing. She isn’t sure what they’re trying to achieve – there’s nothing left inside those wooden walls – when one of the figures makes it to the steel door, cowering behind what little cover there is.

With a groan that is heard throughout the valley, the metal of the door shifts, creating an opening only big enough for a single person to pass through. The second figure runs while shots are being fired, stumbling a few times before reaching the door, and together they disappear inside.

The door closes, letting the bullets of the Eclipse bounce from its steel onto the sandy ground.

Aloy releases her breath, making sure she’s still hidden from sight behind the rocks. What she just saw – that should be *impossible*. She looks at Elisabet, finding a reflection of disbelief on her face. “Those doors,” she whispers, and Elisabet nods, frantically.

They either need to be overridden or opened through genetic identification – neither of which happened just now.
The Eclipse swarm the battlefield below, passing every figure that was shot down. Aloy has to look away when she sees what they’re doing – checking for survivors, then dealing the killing blow. One of them – the leader, no doubt – steps forward, his voice carrying loud enough to be heard all the way up hillside.

“Let their deaths be a reminder and their bodies put up on display to all traitors out there. Let it be known the Buried Shadow demands their blood for abandoning the true cause! Holding the Heir of Shadow hostage, defiling the sacred birthplace. We will not rest until all have bled for their sins!”

Aloy can hear the other Eclipse cheer, a peek from her hiding spot showing them dragging the bodies away. The leader paces the grounds before rejoining the pack, disappearing among the structures.

“Bloodthirsty as ever,” she breathes. There’s ten or fifteen of them, enough to form a true challenge, and it doesn’t seem like they’ll let anyone reach the door without opening fire.

“Maniacs,” Elisabet hisses, drawing Aloy from her planning. She looks at her, eyes spitting fire. “These are the cultists you’ve been fighting?”

“The Eclipse, yeah.” Aloy bites down on her lip, peering around the rocks to take in another glimpse of their defenses. “Don’t think we’ll be getting through if we don’t thin them out first.”


It dawns on her – how this must be the first time Elisabet is seeing the Eclipse and what they can do. For a woman set on saving the entire world, the idea of killing might not come easy. Not after everything that happened.

“It’s the only way,” Aloy says softly, placing her hand on Elisabet’s shoulder. “They’re not going to stop murdering and they won’t let us pass.”

“These are dangerous men.”

She nods. “I can do it alone –”

“No,” Elisabet says immediately. “I’m coming with you.”

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They wait until nightfall, taking note of the Eclipse’s movements as they wait – where they’re guarding, how they patrol. They won’t have to take all of them out; the ones out furthest in the field should do. Maybe one or two of the makeshift watchtowers.

It’s becoming more and more clear that these soldiers aren’t with many. They rely on the chaos of the battlefield to confuse anyone trying to enter the structure, spreading their numbers thin as to cover more ground.

Aloy’s seen bandit camps more organized than this mess. It also means she isn’t able to predict everything. Grateful they put on their Oseram armor earlier, Aloy quietly leads Elisabet and herself closer to the encampment, sticking to cover.

At this range her Focus can finally pick up the nearby soldiers’ positions, giving her the opportunity to tag them. Six.

She feels like they should do more than take out their first line of defense – maybe sabotage their
weapons, burn their supplies – but she doesn’t have any blaze to do it with. If they have time… perhaps later.

“Stay in cover,” she whispers to Elisabet. “Only shoot if I’m in trouble. Don’t be seen.”

Elisabet’s nod is enough confirmation for Aloy to slowly creep away along the bushes and structures. It’s easier to breathe now, knowing Elisabet won’t be right next to her while she does what needs to be done.

The camp is dimly lit, leaving many spots in shadow for Aloy to hide. She waits for the first guard to walk by, then pulls him into the darkness with her. She covers his mouth and nose, muffling any sounds as she thrusts her hunting knife into the side of his neck.

*Like a boar,* she hears Rost’s voice in her ear. *Stab and twist, quickly, Aloy – now slice.*

Her fingers grow warm and wet as the body turns to lead. She pulls him away, into the bushes. One down.

Next is an archer in one of the towers. All she has to do is wait for the right moment when no one else is looking, line up the shot and…

There’s a thud when the body falls to the wooden floor. Aloy scans the area again to be certain, but no one seems to have heard it. Good. It’ll be awhile before someone checks that tower and she isn’t planning to wait around that long.

She slaughters the next three easy enough, years of training guiding her knife. Clean kills, the way Rost taught her. *Just like hunting,* she whispers to herself while doing it. Not for the thrill, but out of necessity.

It’s when she’s got a clear shot at her last target she sees it – a flicker of movement further back in the ruined camp near one of the guards who wasn’t a part of her plan.

“How goes there?” the guard shouts, alerting her target.

Aloy bites down on her lip, hard, and ducks back in cover as her target turns, moving towards the other guard.

She hears a yelp, followed by a chuckle. “Look at that,” the guard says. “A little rat came out to play.”

“Tiny Dirahni,” a gruff second voice says, presumably belonging to Aloy’s target. “Should have stayed with the other women. Known your place.”

Unable to listen without doing anything any longer, Aloy looks at what’s going on. The guard is holding a much smaller figure up by their arm as they struggle. They’re dressed in the same sand colored attire as the earlier ones.

Aloy’s heart stops when her target holds a torch closer to the figure’s face, revealing a girl with big, tear-filled eyes.

“Atris, please,” she cries. “I had no choice, I had to.”

Both guards laugh at her words, delving a deep pit of anger in Aloy’s stomach. The girl is half their size and can hardly be called a woman, her young age palpable in her voice.
“You know what happens to traitors, scum,” the one called Atris spits. He bends through his knees, lowering himself to her height. “We’re going to play a game. You run… we shoot. We’ll stop when you reach that door.”

The other guard chuckles again, pushing the girl forward, making her stumble even as she’s begging them to reconsider. “Five second head start,” the first guard says. “Better use those tiny legs.”

**Enough.** As Atris starts counting Aloy lines up her shot, sending a precision arrow through his companion’s head. Atris himself is only able to call out *Sniper!* before Aloy strikes him down with an arrow, too.

*Fuck.*

Dirahni is still running crisscross through the battle-scarred camp as more Eclipse are alerted. Torches line the Eclipse side of the camp, soldiers shouting at each other as they come down platforms.

“Someone shot Oras!” is shouted from the watchtower, and Aloy sinks her teeth deeper into her lip until she tastes blood.

This was not meant to happen, but there’s hardly a choice now. She twists around, aiming her bow at the nearest Eclipse with a gun and shoots him in the stomach. *This is why you wear armor over your stomach,* she thinks as he cries out in pain, dropping the weapon. He gets a second arrow lodged in his arm before Aloy has to move on to the next target.

She no longer cares about not giving away her position, as long as she can hold them off from firing on the girl before she reaches safety. The second Eclipse she sees with a gun gets an arrow through the head – luck, she was aiming for his shoulder – when she’s spotted.

“It’s her!” one of them yells. “It’s the entity!”

“Shoot her! Shoot her down!”

Her heart beats like a war drum as she sinks behind the wooden cover, trying to move away in the shadows to a better hiding spot while arrows begin to fly in her direction. At least they’re not aimed at the girl.

Aloy is fast and nimble, able to move several paces before popping up out of cover to shoot another soldier. Most of her shots aren’t lethal, fired quickly with the intent of slowing the Eclipse down. There’s no time to look behind her to see where the girl is, not when there are still too many soldiers headed her way. Instinct drives her, the yellow outlines of the Eclipse burning bright on her Focus’ display.

“Hold your fire!”

Aloy doesn’t listen – why should she, they’re the ones trying to kill her, after all – slipping arrow after arrow over her finger, taking aim –

– until there’s no one left.

“I said men, hold your fire!”

No one is shooting at her anymore. It has to be a trick.

Her Focus outlines the newest addition to the – now hiding – Eclipse. It’s their leader, which
shouldn’t be surprising. “Rabashad wants her alive,” he says, making Aloy roll her eyes even as her hands tremble.

There it is.

“If he wants me, he should come get me himself,” she shouts, able to keep her voice from shaking. As long as they’re distracted she can look for an angle, then pick them off one by one.

Their leader must find her amusing, seeing how he laughs. “The entity speaks! And here I thought she’d only bless us with arrows.”

The other men join their leader in laughter, but before Aloy can reply she’s distracted by a message popping up on her Focus.

FROM: Elisabet Sobeck
TO: Aloy
SUBJECT: (no subject)

Don’t worry about me. Do what you have to do. I’ll be fine. Took out two of them.

The message confuses her until her Focus picks up Elisabet’s signature, shielded by two larger yellow ones. All the fire and anger inside of her is flushed out of her system by a single, overwhelming wave of fear.

No.

The leader beckons the cultists and Elisabet out into the open, still speaking but the words only register with Aloy when she forces herself to listen.

“How surprised he will be once he learns there are indeed two entities,” he’s saying, turning his mask in Aloy’s direction. “Although I imagine our priest only needs one. There’s a choice for you to make. Resist, and we’ll make this one’s blood quench the earth before taking you, or come willingly.”

There’s a knife held to Elisabet’s throat and Aloy forgets how to breath.

Seven. Seven yellow figures between her and Elisabet. It’s too many. They’ve all stepped out of hiding, a few of them coming closer to inspect Elisabet. Taunting her.

Damn it all! If only she were alone – ! Aloy might be able to shoot two before they slit Elisabet’s throat. That’s not enough.

Another message shows up on her Focus:

Shoot the leader. Don’t worry about me.

How is she supposed to do that? They’re going to kill her, and if Aloy gives in to their demands they’re both as good as dead. Leaning her back against her cover, Aloy looks at the other side of the battlefield. The girl is nowhere to be seen.

“Come out, entity,” the leader calls. “We can cut smaller bits off until you comply.”

It’s not fair! First Vala and the other young Braves, then Rost, and now Elisabet, too?

Aloy wipes the sweat from her eyes, clinging her fist around her bow before rising to her feet. She
takes aim, pulling the string taut next to her chin. “Let her go,” she says, and this time her voice does
tremble from the effort with which she’s straining her body to perform.

Three more bows rise, aimed at her. She swallows thickly, pushing herself to stay in place – to keep
her bow at the ready.

Her Focus shows Elisabet’s next message automatically.

    Take the shot, Aloy.

“Lower that bow, Nora savage,” the leader says, his tone mocking her. “Your hand is shaking.”

He’s right, her hand is shaking. Even if she took the shot there’d be a big chance of missing her
target. She tries to force it still, to physically override whichever part of her is hesitating, but the
tremor persists.

Cold takes a hold of her. The glint of sunlight hitting snow. Faint gasped breaths for air. Rost’s eyes
finding her from a distance before he slumps forward.

Her vision blurs as sweat or something else fills her left eye, making her blink. She relaxes the string,
pain blooming in her hand when the tension is released, and she looks at Elisabet.

I’m sorry, she mouths, but when she reaches Elisabet’s eyes there’s only anger in them.

    DO YOUR BIT, ALOY. SHOOT THEM.

She wants to tell her, they’ll kill you, but nothing comes out of her before Elisabet’s eyes glow a
brilliant blue in the dark, a light so bright it’s blinding to look at. The Eclipse cry out in surprise, then
in pain, and when Aloy is able to see again Elisabet has broken free from the men holding her.

Those men are now on the ground, no longer moving, as Elisabet throws her entire body at the
leader, taking him by surprise and breaking his balance in a single hit.

Aloy blinks, still shaking, when an arrow whizzes past her. She raises her bow, nocks an arrow and
shoots the archer in the throat. Next, her mind buzzes, blood pounding in her ears. Quick, next.
Another archer. Two arrows – one tearblast by mistake, but it blows him into the rubble behind him.
Good enough.

Her ears are ringing even though no one has used any explosives yet. There’s an angered cry on her
right side and she’s faced with a strong brute rushing towards her when she turns around. Somehow
she manages to grab her spear and wield it, parrying the brute’s blows before thrusting it into the
man’s chest.

Survive, a voice like Rost’s says, filling her head. Whatever it takes, survive.

Where’s Elisabet?

The blue light shouldn’t be hard to find, and it isn’t, but the time it takes Aloy to locate her feels like
a small eternity. There, standing over the leader and the final archer’s bodies –

A blow to the back of her head throws Aloy to the ground, her knuckles scratching coarse sand as
they’re pressed down into the grains by her spear when she lands on top of it.

Move!

She rolls, twisting her spear up to block the incoming blow of a battle axe. The cultist is screaming
incoherently, raising the axe again when he’s forced away from her. It’s Elisabet, blue light pouring out of her as she draws back her fist and punches the cultist down. Then, in a show of unbelievable strength, Elisabet pulls the man back up, slamming him onto the spiked wooden fencing Aloy was using as cover before.

Before she can see if there’s blood – there has to be blood – she’s pulled upright by a painfully firm hand. *Come on*, Elisabet is saying, making Aloy squint her eyes when she looks at her. It’s as if she’s speaking underwater, the words sounding different in Aloy’s ears while she’s tugged along, forced to run towards the door.

Everything blurs together – the running, crossing the wall, the distant shots, the door opening and being pushed through, forced towards the light inside the facility.

“Are you in need of assistance?” a new voice asks. “Welcome, Dr. Sobeck.”

Aloy is driven to her feet once more, the two hands wrapped around her shoulders guiding her further into the facility. Her vision begins to swim as everything loses its sharpness. “Somewhere private,” Elisabet is saying. “Somewhere alone. Now – right now. Bandages, water, a shower would be fantastic.”

They’re led through corridors, past more voices and lights, then into a quieter part of the facility. Finally there’s the sound of a door opening and closing, shutting everything else out. A single light turns on, providing just enough light to be able to make out the general shape of a room and Elisabet next to her.

The door slides open with someone handing Elisabet supplies before it closes again. Elisabet disappears behind a wall and there’s a sound like a waterfall, but it’s inside the room, and then it stops.

Elisabet appears, crouching down in front of her – when was she sat down? – snapping her fingers twice before her eyes. Elisabet’s no longer glow.

“Aloy, come on, get back here,” Elisabet says. “I need to know if you’re okay. Are you hurt? What’s your birth date… never mind. The last thing you ate, what was it?”

She can’t remember. Everything is covered in a thick haze. She knows what was going on but it’s just so far away at the moment. She needs more time – her head is pounding, she needs –

Rost, where’s Rost? Is he still out there?

*He’s dead*, a different part of her supplies, and of course he is. He’s been dead for so long. Aloy shudders, closing her eyes. She should have known Helis was there. Should’ve realized the leader was missing.

The hands on her arms squeeze once. “Goddamnit. GAIA, can you turn on the lights some more?”

The buzzing of her Focus makes her flinch, and it’s taken away quickly. “No,” she cries out. “I need it, give it back!”

Her reaching hands are pushed back down. “No, you don’t. You can have it back later. Damnit, Aloy, I have to figure out if you’re concussed, in shock, dangerously injured, or all of the above – work with me here.”

The light inside the room becomes brighter, making it easier to look at Elisabet’s face. Aloy can see her Focus’ glow as it relays a message, making Elisabet frown. “Thanks for asking, GAIA. I think
they listened to your request.”

How did they get here? They were outside moments ago, they had to fight –

Aloy looks down at her hands, heart jumping for her throat when she sees them covered in blood. There’s so much of it and Elisabet is covered, too. The fog is lifted as she remembers everything clearly – the knife, Elisabet, the leader of the cultists, how she couldn’t take the shot –

“I couldn’t,” she says, the words spilling out quicker than she’s able to process herself. “They had you and – and – I couldn’t.”

Elisabet shakes her head, pulling a rag from the delivered supplies, then dunking it in a bowl of water. “This is not the time, Aloy. We’ll talk about it later. Are you injured?”

No, of course she’s not, and they have to talk about it now. “I couldn’t do it,” she repeats, “I should have but I couldn’t, they were going to –”

“Aloy.” Elisabet’s hands are on her wrists, and even though her eyes are no longer glowing there’s something burning in them. “Stop this right now. We can talk about it when I’m certain you’re not bleeding out!”

“I’m fine,” she shouts, trying to twist her hands away from Elisabet. “And I’m sorry! I should have taken the shot but – but I couldn’t! Not if they were going to kill you –”

Elisabet’s face twists into something far angrier than Aloy has ever seen before, and she freezes at the sight of it. “They were not. Going. To kill. Me,” she hisses, shoving the wet rag over Aloy’s hands and rubbing her skin with it. Her hands sting. “What I have instead of a carotid artery is nothing vital to my overall system and what they thought would kill me is in fact a mere inconvenience. They were going to kill you, Aloy. And you need to listen to me when I give you a command. And you are bleeding!”

The press of the rag against her upper arm makes her suck in a surprised breath of pain. Oh. She is bleeding. An arrow must have brushed past her, carving a line in her skin. It’s hardly noticeable, even if it is bleeding sluggishly.

Aloy swallows back to urge to yell, instead saying, “You’re not my leader.”

“No, that’s right,” Elisabet says, eyebrows scrunched together as her lips pull up into a snarl. “It’s much worse. You’re not my subordinate, you’re my goddamn child.”

“And you’re my mother! How am I supposed to –” she chokes on her words, eyesight blurring beyond what happened earlier. “What was I supposed to do, let them k – kill –”

She wasn’t able to save Rost, couldn’t stop Helis’ knife – and how could she have stopped them from doing the same to Elisabet if she couldn’t stop a single man before?

“I can’t lose you too,” she cries. “Not after Rost. Not when I just got you. Not to them. I – I need you. I can’t –”

She should’ve never brought Elisabet here. It’s on her, all of it.

The wet rag is replaced by the bed dipping slightly next to her and two arms wrapping around her, holding her in a way that makes the tears fall from her eyes even faster. She’s held against Elisabet’s chest, can hear her heart beating the same as ever.
“Oh Aloy,” Elisabet says, her voice echoing in her chest. She can feel her Focus being returned to her temple but can’t bring herself to open her eyes and see the interface light up. “GAIA, run a scan on her for me, okay? Oh, sweet child. I’m so sorry. I never wanted you to be thrown into all of this violence – to suffer so much.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t shoot him.”

Elisabet hushes her. “It’s okay, baby. I’m not angry with you. Even if it may seem that way. I’m angry with this world, that goddamn cult – but not you.”

“I was so afraid.”

“I know,” Elisabet murmurs, pressing kisses to her crown. “I know, Aloy. I was too. It’s okay now, it’s over. I should’ve been more clear in my messages, I messed up too. Should’ve been more careful.”

Something pulls inside of her until it snaps, and whether that something is guilt or fear or relief doesn’t matter. Aloy clings to Elisabet, listens to her heart, and this – this is her mother. Even if she wasn’t there when she was born. Even if it took such a long time to find her.

Even if death itself has stood in their way.

She buries her face against the Oseram plating, surrounded by the scent of metal and leather and machine. “Mother,” she whispers, voice breaking. The hand at the back of her head is a comfort she has long dreamed of.

“I’m here,” Elisabet answers. “I’m right here. Not going anywhere.”

She continues to weep silently as her body lets go of a pain deep inside. A place that grew every time she noticed the absence in her life, the one not even Rost could fill.

There’s a lot they have to do, later. Things to figure out inside the facility – which sub-function they’re dealing with, why they came here in the first place – but for now Aloy lets herself be held.

It’s enough.
Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

Late chapter is late! I'm sorry y'all!

A lot has been happening for me. I've recently started getting involved in a larger writing project that's I'm not really allowed to say much about at this junction. I've also come back from my trip to America and boy... that was something. The states sure are big. c':

Rest assured I am still writing this story. I know I always say that and then disappear as of late, but I'm really working on getting myself back on a set schedule. I got sick a couple of weeks ago and am still recovering but getting there slowly (as well as juggling my new tasks for the unnamed project.)

As always, thank you for your amazing and wonderful comments, and a big thank you to burbear for beta reading. Love you bro!

CONTENT WARNING: for the mention of dead babies in one of the datapoints mid-chapter.

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Sobeck Journal, 1-7-42

There’s a lot to unpack.

First things first: murder does not make you feel better but I can’t bring myself to regret any of those men’s deaths. I can’t feel anything when I remember that moment in the camp, even though I can recall everything in perfect detail. Somehow a part of my system prevents me from ‘experiencing’ what happened.

It didn’t feel like it was ‘just me’ acting, either. I’ve asked GAIA about her opinions and she mentions adding strategic hints to my subconscious register in order to aid me during the fight but… I think she was there. So in a way, I’ve turned her into a murderer. Or she me. Doesn’t matter.

I’d do it again.

There was no other way.

---

Sobeck Journal, 1-8-42

Aloy is asleep now. Patched her up, asked some questions to check her memory after she calmed down. She’s fine. Will be fine. Had some broth and a change of clothes before I tucked her into bed.

GAIA showed me the recordings of her Focus. How she was picking the cult members off one by
one in this meticulous, calculated way before she saw me. And then she froze. Because she couldn’t lose me too. Not after she lost Rost – to these same cult members, presumably.

God.

She’s told me the story before but I never imagined it’d come into play like this. Even if I had, I was too busy trying to get Aloy out of the situation to think of anything other than that.

When she froze it made a part of me so incredibly angry. Not with her, but with our circumstance at the time.

GAIA can replace me – god forbid – but there’s only one of Aloy. No amount of tinkering can bring her back the way she is and I love her so, so much. The daughter I never had before. My child. I’ll do anything to keep her safe.

---

There’s a soft frown resting on Aloy’s brow.

Elisabet stays crouched next to the bed, observing her quietly and suppressing the urge to brush aside wisps of escaped hair. With the lights turned down low it’s easy to imagine they’re home and the world outside the chamber isn’t close to the barbaric landscape of ‘66.

When did these facilities become home?

Aloy is the picture of stillness, her breaths coming far and wide in between. In sleep more than any other time she seems so young – perhaps closer to her true age.

Balancing her weight carefully on the balls of her feet, Elisabet leans back. She’s aware she stopped her own breathing cycle around five minutes ago. At first it was a subconscious action, but then it became a choice. After everything they’ve been through today she’s afraid to wake her.

Her child.

The only offspring she’ll ever have.

“The servitor is waiting to speak with you,” GAIA reminds her. Maybe it’s her imagination playing tricks on her, but Elisabet can almost feel the machine’s presence lingering just outside the private chamber.

‘It can wait,’ she mouths, tracing the gentle curves of Aloy’s face with her sight. Miracle of life, strong and frail at the same time. I almost lost her, runs through her mind.

“She is alright, Elisabet,” GAIA says in her ear, voice soft enough to be confused with a murmur. “You were there, nothing happened to her.”

But it was close – too close. Elisabet regrets not taking out the men who found her quicker – killing them! She regrets not killing them sooner! What kind of monster has she become? What happened to the woman who vowed to protect all life?

Her daughter’s quiet breaths are the only sound she can hear.

Perhaps all life is too much. There was no other way – and she’s certain she’d do it again if the need arises, if someone else threatens Aloy’s life. How could she live with herself if she were to look the other way? If she let someone –
She closes her eyes, wishing away the images her mind conjures. They stay, scenes soaked in blood taunting her.

GAIA hasn’t mentioned the conversation they had at one point a few weeks ago. The one where Elisabet made her promise to intervene in a scenario where she’d somehow no longer be in control over her own actions. It’s because that conversation isn’t relevant and they both know it.

She was in full control, completely aware of how many bodies she left behind in the rush to get Aloy to safety. The blows she dealt were deliberate, and by god she’d be lying if she didn’t hope most of them stayed down on the ground for good.

She’s never quite cared for someone in this way. Maybe GAIA comes close but…

Something swells in her chest – a feeling that is strange and familiar at the same time, a not-pain that pulls on the strings inside of her. This child in front of her, this wonderful creation…

She’d have sacrificed her place in Elysium for her without second thought. Her life. Anything.

Everything.

---

Elisabet leaves the room eventually, the door closing behind her. She lets go of the breath held in her mechanical lungs and notices something inside her steel itself. A part of her broke outside the facility – pushed her into becoming someone she wasn’t before – and she already knows it’s changed her for good.

In the dim lighting of the facility, the servitor almost blends in with the walls as it observes her quietly. Its cameras shift minutely as it does – to simulate a lifelike appearance – light catching off the glass eyeballs. Elisabet looks back at it, studies the face as she drowns in thoughts that lack words.

It smiles at her.

She blinks, pushing her palms against the edges of her eyes to break free from whatever is holding her captive. “Can’t believe you and I are basically the same thing,” she says, shaking her head once.

The servitor doesn’t answer directly. “Welcome, Elisabet Sobeck,” it says instead, the female voice making clear it has chosen the mother personae. “What would you like to do today?”

“Can I inspect you for a second?” she asks, because fiddling around without permission seems wrong somehow. The servitor steps towards her in compliance.

She tests the range of mobility by moving its arms, looks for any obvious signs of destruction. “How long have you been awake?”

“August 26,” the servitor supplies helpfully, and Elisabet raises her eyebrows.

“Year?”

“Data currently unavailable.”

“How many months are there in a year?”

“There are twelve months in a single year. A year is divided in seasons. You will learn more about these things in the Lyceum.”
“Never mind,” Elisabet finds herself muttering, patting the servitor on its shoulder. “No use in asking you how many months you’ve been active either, right?”

“Data currently unavailable. When not in use, sleep mode is advised.” The servitor’s words are spoken with everlasting patience, its tone exactly as gentle as Patrick programmed it to be. All in all the machine seems to be in good state, no parts dangling off of it, no loose wiring producing sparks.

She backs away from it, hands reaching out behind her to find one of the larger cargo crates set against the wall. Leaning against it, she pulls up the layout of the facility on her Focus.

What survived of the lower levels is an uninhabitable mess.

“GAIA,” she whispers, reaching out to her as much as she can from this distance. If only she had her team with her – or a part of it. How is she supposed to work through all of this? It’s like a bad joke. Even if she started off the entire project she’s nothing without her people, while they would’ve been fine functioning in her absence.

“Yes, Elisabet,” GAIA answers. Different rooms on the digital map light up briefly. “I see. The chances of reaching the facility’s core are… abysmal.”

That’s one way to put it.

It’s a miracle they have any power as it is. It’s impossible to tell how much damage the facility has sustained from looking solely at the floor plans, and the blocked off hallways and stairwells make going down there in person a task worthy a seat on Mount Olympus itself.

“What happened here?” she mutters, brushing one hand over the projected map, letting it fade away. “Which one of them is it?”

Which sub-function took refuge in these ruins?

“I am unable to provide you the data you seek.” GAIA says, sounding apologetic.

Elisabet pushes her hair back behind her ears, fingers coming across the tangled braids. She’s been keeping it the way Aloy did it for her that one time, having attributed a strange sense of comfort to the habit. “It’s alright, GAIA,” she says. “I know you’re giving it your all, too. If only there was a terminal I could access…”

She switches on her Focus in an attempt to locate one when the servitor looks right at her. “A terminal is present in the control room,” it says, gesturing down the hall towards the larger rooms of the facility – the ones they were bustled through earlier, filled with people and their means to survive. “Please follow me.”

Elisabet didn’t pay much attention to them earlier, these people living inside the facility, too preoccupied with making sure Aloy wasn’t dying in her arms. As the servitor leads her past tents made with tarp and crates she realizes what she’s looking at, exactly.

A camp of refugees.

Dark eyes stare at her as she moves past, hushed whispers falling in the space behind her. One figure breaks free from the rest, stepping towards her and the servitor. Elisabet recognizes the girl from Aloy’s Focus recordings – Dirahni, the one Aloy broke her cover for.

She’s younger than Elisabet thought, fourteen years at most. The Focus didn’t show the childlike roundness of her cheeks to quite the same extent, even if she carries herself with knowledge beyond
her years.

Pausing in front of the servitor, Dirahni performs a small bow.

“Hello child,” the machine says in reply. “What would you like to do today?”

“May I speak with the stranger?” the girl asks, looking past the servitor to observe Elisabet as she does.

“We are on our way to a new activity. You should ask if you’re allowed to join,” the mother personae says, clearly enforcing the parenting laws laid down by Patrick’s groundwork.

Elisabet touches the servitor’s shoulder to gain its attention, only noting how human the interaction is meant to be while she’s performing it. “It’s fine,” she says. “She can come with us.”

The servitor leads the way to the stairs of the control room, opening the door with a single touch. Dirahni has fallen in line behind Elisabet, keeping a polite distance as they ascend. The lights come on, dimmed in their low-powered state, revealing a perfectly intact space with familiar terminals and platforms.

“Brilliant,” Elisabet whispers. She can’t help moving past the servitor and reaching out to one of the screens, bringing it to life. It works. The loading time is a little slow but that’s to be expected. “Let’s see what the damage is, GAIA.”

“You will have to provide me with all intel, Elisabet, as I am unable to access the system.”

“Alright, I’ll be your eyes and ears. Let’s take a look at the logs…”

The command tree opens and everything goes dark – not just the screen. The entire room is zapped from its power. With her eyes being able to perceive visuals without light, Elisabet can see Dirahni holding herself tightly, arms wrapped around her chest, blinking furiously.

“It’s okay, Dirahni,” Elisabet says quickly. “Just a power cut, nothing to worry about. I can fix it.”

She’s not sure she actually can. The screen is not responding to any input. She sends out a call to GAIA, not willing to linger on the relief she feels when there’s a reply.

“I am here, Elisabet. I would say your diagnosis of the situation is correct.”

Kicking herself mentally for getting stuck in this situation, Elisabet crouches down to the foot of the terminal. The first thing that comes to mind is a short circuit, which is also one of the easier theories to disprove. The metal panel makes a god awful sound as she bends it open with her hands – no need for screwdrivers anymore – when the servitor steps forward.

“Let’s run and jump and blow off steam,” it says, and Elisabet recognizes the phrase as one meant to stop tense situations from escalating.

“Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

A hand on her shoulder pushes her through a veil of consciousness, sending her spiraling into a mind much more chaotic than GAIA’s.

Oh.

She may have fucked up.
Ted’s office.

Without Ted though, somehow.

Elisabet rolls her eyes because there’s no one else around to see it anyway. As far as mental safe spaces go, this has to be one of the most ironic ones. The only thing her digital mind can conjure up to protect her consciousness from falling apart is the room that, to her, signifies the loss of everything.

At least it’s clean this time. All the props and details, the papers and confetti and Ted’s belongings – they’re all gone. What’s left is bare bones furniture and a window that shows a deep, dark emptiness outside.

“Note to self,” she mutters, running her hand over the empty desk, “never touching strange servitors again.”

Then she notices something else that’s new – the door to the office. It’s ajar, the faintest trails of purple light coming through the crack.

When stranded in a room designed to hold your mental self together, what’s the worst that could happen by exploring the unknowns?

Probably something really bad.

Elisabet pushes herself away from the desk, touching the doorknob carefully. When nothing happens, she tries opening it further. A part of her notes that this is probably where Aloy gets it from too, the impulses to do dangerous things and – okay. That’s a little funny.

The door opens, revealing the halls of the E-9 facility, to her surprise. They are fully lit, functioning exactly the way they were meant to – clean, organized, and empty.

“Hello?” she calls out, not quite willing to set foot into this annexed part of her mind. Is it even hers to begin with? Or is this –

Something inside of her grows incredibly giddy at the next thought, even though it’s also more than a little disturbing and maybe not good news at all. What is this, a part of the servitor’s mind?

She almost loses her footing when she hears GAIA’s voice. “Elisabet?”

“Oh, fuck me,” she breathes. “You can actually reach me inside this mess?”

The facility is quiet, the lights never changing in intensity.

GAIA’s voice finds her again. “Query: where are you?”

“Inside me. Remember Ted’s office? Because that’s where I am again. No memories this time though. I think something went wrong with the servitor.”

“Query: what were you trying to do?”

She twists the doorknob out of giving her hands something to do in this imaginary space, fascinated to see it fully functional. “Getting the power back online – hey, why are you reverting back to your original speech settings?”

“Unknown query. Please answer query.”
Squinting her eyes into the hallway, Elisabet comes to the firm conclusion she isn’t speaking with GAIA after all. “I was trying to determine the nature of the sub-function inhabiting this facility because I’m trying to help. MINERVA said they were in danger.”

The servitor appears at the other end of the hallway, making its way down towards Elisabet. “Query: why are you here?” it asks, still using GAIA’s voice. It stops moving when they are standing face to face.

Feeling more cautious than she did, Elisabet takes a moment to collect herself before answering. “I’m here to help,” she says. “MINERVA mentioned the facility being under attack. I saw the men out there. I know you’ve been harboring these people from them.”

Without giving a facial reaction to any of it, the servitor says, “Query: where is HADES?” making Elisabet step back.

“What do you mean?”

The facility darkens, a transcript appearing on a holo screen in the doorway as a loud, booming voice begins to speak.

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HADES: Preparations are needed.

BAHAVAS: Your will be done, O Shadow. How may we be of service?

HADES: Should Spire capture fail, commence plan B. Transmitting coordinates.

BAHAVAS: We will not fail you, O Shadow.

HADES: Failure is unacceptable. Without Spire, commence plan B. Retrieve facility. Create own Entity. Adapt.

BAHAVAS: I see… Will you be there to guide us?

HADES: Affirmative.

---

RABASHAD: We are here, O Shadow. Speak to us. I, Rabashad, beg you, unworthy as we are for failing you. Guide us through the next steps of your plan.

MULTISERVITOR, MALE: Children, another day has passed.

RABASHAD: It speaks – ! Is it you, O Shadow? Have you returned in this form to help us, your fallen disciples?

MULTISERVITOR, MALE: If you are in need of assistance, I can help you. Rabashad, you have suffered severe bruising.

RABASHAD: I – I am unworthy of your attention, O Shadow. As leader, I am now responsible for our failures. There are other faithful who have suffered far more than I.

MULTISERVITOR, MALE: Let’s head inside, children. It is time to rest.
RABASHAD: Forgive my insolence, O Shadow. I cannot help but wonder when we will be given more orders.

MULTISERVITOR, FEMALE: You need to rest, Rabashad. I cannot feed you all. There is little food here.

RABASHAD: The hunters will return soon. When will we create our new champion? The new life you promised?

MULTISERVITOR, FEMALE: There are few viable zygotes remaining in storage. Probability of success given state of facility is unsure.

RABASHAD: Under your guidance, we will succeed. I… I have to ask. Why choose this voice? The male form is vastly superior…

MULTISERVITOR, FEMALE: I do not understand your query.

RABASHAD: Forgive me, O Shadow. I am not worthy of questioning you.

---

MALE #1: Maybe it’s an impostor. Maybe this is the real test and we’re to cull the Shadow’s pretender, then operate these halls ourselves.

MALE #2: You shouldn’t speak like that, Oras. Should know better than to disrespect the Buried Shadow.

MALE #1: If it’s the Buried Shadow, and I don’t think so. Where are our orders? Where is our champion?

MALE #2: The Shadow said it would take time. We should be patient. The Shadow has seen us through this far.

MALE #1: Coddled us. Kept us in the dark. When will we attack?

MALE #2: You need to watch it!

---


FEMALE #1: They attacked the Chosen Children! Opened the casings without your permission, O Shadow. I wasn’t able to stop them in time – only two remain.

MALE #1: Forgive us! What should we do?

MULTISERVITOR, FEMALE: After what just happened, the aggressors cannot be left alone. They have broken community rules.

FEMALE #1: We cannot trust them. They no longer believe in the cause.
**FEMALE #2:** Atris was there. I saw him.

**MALE #2:** Drive them out!

**MULTISERVITOR, FEMALE:** Remove the aggressors. Children, I want you to be safe in here.

**FEMALE #2:** As you wish, O Shadow.

**MALE #1:** We will do as you say.

---

**FEMALE #1:** We were wrong, all of us. We didn’t know. How could we have known? Told all our lives there can only be a Sun-King, never a Sun-Queen. We assumed the Buried Shadow was a man, too. Now we see.

**MALE #1:** Our eyes are open!

**FEMALE #1:** From the Buried Shadow rises the Mother Reborn! Shadow gives birth to light as women birth children! No longer will we follow those unwilling to see the real prophecy.

**FEMALE #2:** The Mother of Shadow leads us!

**MALE #2:** We will obey!

---

“Oh,” she breathes once the stream of information stops. It’s a lot to process. One thing is certain though: “I am a dumbass.”

“You are Dr. Sobeck,” the servitor says, still using GAIA’s voice. “You are not affiliated with HADES, also referred to as the Buried Shadow.”

“Yeah, definitely not working for HADES.” She’s able to somewhat feel the servitor’s hand on her shoulder – the one in the real world, not this conjured up image in front of her – and reaches for it. The movement is much slower than she’s used to, which probably means time isn’t passing very fast out there, just like last time.

She touches her other hand to her Focus, then transfers a single file to the servitor in an instant. The video file starts playing in front of her eyes, showing the B1-001 chamber in the second version of E-9.

“LK1A1,” the servitor in her mindscape says, and Elisabet nods, feelings of pride swelling in her chest.

“Did you watch over her?” she can’t help but ask. “Was that you?”

This time, the servitor’s eyes look right at her. “Affirmative,” it says, confirming Elisabet’s working theory.

She’s rewarded with a feeling, something that’s hard to describe: the fleeting sensation of being inside the E-9 facility in 3020 and 3021. Then something akin to flight, and then resettling in the current facility. Hiding all signals. Communicating with MINERVA, and a growing presence of doom.
The knowledge HADES would override the system if it got to her.

Elisabet catches her breath, truly seeing what’s in front of her, and that earlier pride only grows. “Hello, ELEUTHIA,” she says, watching the servitor’s eyes light up. “You’ve done some amazing work.”

---

The power comes back on, computer terminals springing to life. The servitor helps Elisabet back to her feet, and this time Elisabet can get a sense of who’s hiding behind that facade through their touching hands.

*You are one smart cookie,* she thinks, not sure if the thought will transfer – but GAIA certainly picks up on it.

“It should come to me as no surprise it was ELEUTHIA taking refuge in the precursor facility,” the AI says, “and yet.”

“One in seven, right, GAIA?”

“Indeed.”

But what’s most surprising is the way the sub-function has gone about it. Splitting itself to function as both the facility and the servitor. It has done something HADES tried to do – something MINERVA doesn’t seem to consider necessary: given itself bodily autonomy.

Elisabet looks at the servitor more closely, now seeing similarities between the sub-function and its alpha in its chosen appearance – the short black hair and brown eyes almost identical to Patrick’s.

It makes so much sense.

ELEUTHIA, as the servitor, touches the terminal and the command tree opens. Elisabet is able to find the logs quick enough, a cursory glance giving more confirmation to the situation as a whole.

“Waking multiservitor B1-15, repair tasking… Generator malfunction, repair tasking…” She stops looking for the moment, creating a copy of the log for her own records. “It’s all there. You’ve done a great job on this place,” she says to the sub-function.

“It was a matter of survival,” ELEUTHIA says, folding their hands in front of them. “To not be found.”

*Yeah… about that…*

Setting her own questions on the back burner, Elisabet glances over to their right where Dirahni is still watching them with wide eyes.

“Who are you?” the girl blurs out, manners making way for impatient curiosity. Elisabet can’t blame her. Between the light show and the strange relationship that grew between her and the servitor, she’d want to know some things as an outside observer too.

“A friend,” ELEUTHIA answers for her.

Dirahni scoffs, crossing her arms over her midriff tightly. “You mean, the entity. Or one of them.”

It’s curious to see the exact moment ELEUTHIA decides to execute the parental functions reflected in the servitor’s eyes. Elisabet stays back as ELEUTHIA walks over to Dirahni and crouches down
until they’re at the same level.

“If you wish to speak with Dr. Sobeck you should do so now. It is almost time to get some rest.”

Part of the petulant teenager act melts away as Dirahni nods and bows her head. “Yes, O Shadow.”

ELEUTHIA leaves, the door closing behind the servitor seemingly allowing Dirahni to finally move. She steps forward, keeping a row of consoles between them, and looks at Elisabet as if she’s trying to take her apart.

Hanging back, Elisabet finds a spot along the wall to lean against without risking the accidental activation of any terminals. “It’s alright,” she says. “I won’t bite.”

“You and the other one, you are entities.”

The way Dirahni keeps looking at her makes it clear she expects some form of acknowledgment to her statement, and Elisabet nods. “I suppose Aloy and I have been called entities before.”

“But the Shadow calls you her friend – after waging war against you.”

If only Aloy were awake to handle this conversation.

Instead, Elisabet sighs. “Listen – I don’t understand it either but I’m glad the uh, Shadow, and I have become … friends. What’s important is that we’re here to help. The Shadow asked us to come and it seems like that was a smart decision on their part.”

Dirahni’s complexion turns ashen as she’s no doubt reminded of what lies just outside the facility – the looming structures and deathtraps. For a second all Elisabet can see is a frightened child and she’s seen far too many of them, more than any one lifetime needs.

“It’s alright,” she says, repeating her earlier words. “We’re not leaving until all of you are safe. I promise.”

The girl’s stance changes, the defensive edges around her softening. “You already saved me,” she whispers, the violet glow from one of the terminals bouncing off the side of her face. Her eyes shine brightly when they look up at her. “How did you do that? Your blue light, where does it come from? How did you defeat all of them?”

Besides the fact that explaining all of it to a teenager she hardly knows seems like a bad idea, Elisabet is at a loss of what to say. It’s a part of her, a combination of rage and her body knowing when to move, and the light…

As much as she created GAIA, and as much as GAIA created her, Elisabet has no way of unraveling her system of life. It just is, or it became…

“I don’t know,” she says, then adds, “Someone needed to stop them,” as a weak consolation prize – but it’s true. At the core of it all she draws a blank, and what happened out there was born from bitter desperation first and foremost.

Her answers satisfy the girl about as much as they do Elisabet herself. Thankfully the door opening marks ELEUTHIA’s return and a reprieve from Dirahni’s questions. As the servitor leads her out the control room, she throws one last look over her shoulder that tells Elisabet this won’t be the last time she’s asked about these things.

Alone at last, she lets her body slide down to the floor, sitting against a hard, cold surface.
“Are you all right?” GAIA asks her, and she’s not sure. Was this situation always in the cards? Was she always destined to protect Aloy at the cost of life?

Was the rage always a part of her or was it programmed to be? Was it there at the beginning?

Not that it truly matters – her heart won’t allow her to function any other way at this point.

“I will be,” she answers. She looks at her hands, her tools, with their artificial wrinkles and imperfections. Capable of so much. Why waste more time doing nothing?

Rising to her feet, Elisabet approaches the terminal. The screen lights up with a single gesture and now – without ELEUTHIA trying to stop her – she looks deeper into the files, committing all new data to memory. It’s the least she can do.

End Notes

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