The Voidling

by Othanas

Summary

Having awakened in a different time, place, and reality - the Earthling Andromeda's introduction to the brutal landscape of Ferelden is a quiet and suspicious one.

With no known language to readily communicate, an arcane resistance that halts all magical intervention, and the forcible implant into a culture so vastly different from her own, Andromeda must accept that her tale on Earth has come to a violently abrupt end.

However, unknown to Andromeda and those within the ranks of the Andrastian Inquisition, her story lights anew with a cosmically malformed and hungering purpose.

Pray for planet Thedas.
**Blue Skies**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Log - December XX.**


I am so sorry. Will join you soon. I love you.

Andra

The check engine light glares a soft yellow beneath the speedometer, fuel at one fourth of a tank. Each station passed has been closed or abandoned. Yesterday, upon entering Wyoming, I stopped for fuel the last time. The radio in the passenger seat crackles. Voices, scratched and frantic over AM frequencies, have heralded a large-scale attack three times in the last 24 hours- it will likely happen today.

Again, I focus myself and think of the surrounding landscape. Visiting Yellowstone National Park is, and has always been, a desire of mine. Old Faithful, hiking, stargazing. The idea of sharing that experience was one I had yearned for. With them.

Shutting the thought down as my throat tightens I instead focus on getting to route 191 while rounding the West Thumb. Taking it slow necessary. After Martial Law had been declared two months ago, lack of maintenance is apparent in all areas of life. Drifts four feet high swathe the road in some areas, banking into trees along the ditch. Martial Law is a far more treacherous thing in reality. The US had declared a State of Emergency in opposition to the military's desire to regulate, which lead to a massive downward spiral of internal affairs. It is survival of random lottery now.

I would have started my doctoral program this fall, my research on Theoretical Relativity - and of what takes place just before, and maybe beyond, the event horizon. Boring stuff, some might say, but dreaming isn’t for everyone.

Unfortunately, Berkeley is gone. The entire West coast, gone. East coast, too. Roughly 143,000,000 Americans... Just... Gone. India had been a target, Australia, too. Several locations along East Asian countries.

The numbers were always different, but it had to be in the billions. In the face of such devastation, who’s counting?

As the attacks kept coming, it was no longer political. The sheer inability of world leader’s unable to organize... Was... Is... Unusual. But it’s too late to question. Now, it is gun fight into nuclear winter that will either produce a genetic bottle neck or mass extinction. Earth has been through several, what’s another?

A turn comes up, right on highway 191. About 10 more miles. I use my blinkers and am not sure
why. Been the only one on the road for hours. Both thoughts and wheels travel easier after turning onto a road less neglected. Snow has covered the pine in a thick comforter and steam from the natural hot springs pour upward in translucent plumes... It is beautiful here. Unmarred for now.

For a time, there is enough silence to produce a placid calm - until white noise flickers on and a panicked voice wrenches me alert. It is the same as before, but this time they are promising that supposed attack. Multiple warheads headed for the grain belt where the largest number of Americans still survive. The terrorized voice doesn't say who has launched them. Was it China? Russia? North Korea? The US itself?

Three missiles are headed towards Wyoming alone, and admittedly, I'm curious as to why they've targeted the mostly empty state. A nearly active caldera sleeps here, but no amount of surface bombing would cause tectonic shift; one would have to go underground for that.

Shuddering, I shake my head rough and quick. The window of opportunity is limited, but I'm set on trying to make it in time. Those colors, hot and saturated against the snowy landscape. If the blast were as near as the radio claimed it to be, this will be one hell of a way to sign off.

Another turn right, I stay to the left of the visitation center for Old Faithful. Navigation around these snow-covered roads is worth it as blobs of hot, bright color bloom into view. Pulling to a stop and cracking open the driver side of the Subaru, I squint at the brightness of the sky. It’s brilliance is magnified by the light refracting off of the rolling fields of snow and the lack of particle refraction in winter’s atmosphere.

There isn’t a lot of surface fear that remains - simply resignation.

The sound of ice underfoot is loud; sharp crunching a reverberating echo against whatever solid object it meets. I open the back hatch and begin to compile my hiking pack. Confirming that the most important belongings are inside, it’s slung over my shoulder. The walk to Morning Glory isn't as simple as one would have hoped and requires careful side stepping within the rocky terrain.

A whistling sound begins to pierce through the silence of wilderness, signaling re-entry. Deviating from the walkway, I step off into the brush. The gentle scruff of desaturate, dead weeds cling and scratch at my calves and thighs, tickling almost. Of course, walking near an open acidic hot spring is dangerous, but who’s left to tell me no? For a fleeting moment, I think of running. To try to out drive the blast. The want fades.

Despite being without 'fear', my face is wet. A sound hits the collar of my parka, darkening the fabric from rust to umber.

Tears. Again.

The others that trickle down are painful as they freeze, skin sticking to each drop. In need of distraction, I pull out my cellphone to record the landscape, panning over the range of colors held within the vibrant pool.

"Look, we made it," my throat clenches as if I’ve swallowed hot nails; each breath pained and quivery. "If you were here, we could’ve joked about taking turns in a nice sulfuric acid spring." The laugh that follows is again hoarse, wet.

Reflections glint off the touch screen. There are salt stains running down my cheeks, fresh tracks following. Lifting my glasses, I wipe away a few before tilting back to the sky. There it is, to the Southwest. A speck in the distance. If I were anyone else, attentions would be blissful and serene. Some missiles were estimated to travel at 5,000 meters a second. No time left.
At the oversight of the walkway, just above Morning Glory pool, I lean against the railing and flip the camera around. A sudden laugh, distant and dry, almost startles me as I wipe a few more tears away, glasses fogging.

"Always a mess," The missile is in the background, a violent black bug infecting the sky. I watch it and not the lens.

I let my hand, and the phone, drop to my side. There's no point in fighting back the sharp, painful sob. It takes a few moments before I compile myself.

"I'm so sorry," Lifting the phone, I stare hard into the lens. "I would sacrifice worlds for this to be different. I would do anything." Emotion deserves little attention now as the whistling has changed, particles in the atmosphere generating a thundering, turbulent sound.

The skyline is a crisp, calm blue.

And then-

Chapter End Notes

This is a long-fic with a slow build. The horror will come later; first is the immersion into Thedas. This MGiT has no experience with Thedas/Dragon Age and it is not considered a game in this version of Earth.

If you wanted an audible summarization of this fic, check out The Voidling on Spotify. It's full of intense, melancholic, industrial ambience and is largely what I listen to when writing this fic.

I also have a tumblr dedicated to this fic.

Bioware has sole ownership over the Dragon Age franchise.

Be forewarned: massive canon divergence ahead.
Dying is like the hurling hunks of fat with 50,000 tons of kinetic force into molten iron at about 28,000 miles per second, which is roughly 15% the speed of light. Simultaneously melting and crushing while blind; a formation. Enough for shockwaves and concussive thundering explosions. If there's stuff in the way, that is.

Why this is the most apt description, blubber body slamming the molten cores of the most massive stars in complete darkness, I am not entirely sure. If I could just open a mouth to laugh at the absurdity of it.

Or laugh that comprehension still possible under such hostile conditions. This is me comprehending this, right? This is what dying feels like, right?

If so, fiction has one thing correct: there's an expansive inky blackness in death. Reminiscent of a midway point between lucidity and lucid dreaming. Instead of a series of moments known as 'life flashing before your very eyes,' there is a tremendous amount of blunt, voraciously stupid agony. There are no limbs, at least not which can be felt. No face, let alone an arm or a leg... No mouth yet. Pain floats in the space surrounding, oscillating between crushing burning to the apex trill of nerve ache. White static - constant and wriggling.

Floating. It's taking too long, but what exactly should be taking? If this something is taking too long?

There'd been the hope that death was a long, unawares sleep. But no - it is viscous, flowing vortex of perfect, pristine precision. This is not chaos. It is intentional. Destined. Causal. There should be a path, but instead, it is simply a pool. A place. A space with constant, thundering pressure. To exist and to not.

Falling. Something's changed - it is no longer right. I am removed. Unfinished. There is no path, no ability to become what is meant to be.

The pain lessens. I cannot decide if it's because I have become accustomed to it or it has shifted.

Without that pain, boredom slips in. I try to count until something happens, but lose at 49,998. Each number an eternity. But a voice... The voice! My voice! The echo of my sounds are tangible, languid
ripples bouncing off of surfaces I cannot see. It is at 49,999 when I become aware that I can open my eyes. I still have a body?

The effort it takes to lift just one eyelid is near monumental. As dim light hits, the agony returns - more intense and burning and consuming than it felt the first time. It is hard to think - my head full, as if it was full of sloshing water. An improvement from the mush before.

On my knees. Puking, convulsing after each spill of bile. I can't breathe. The shaking is so violent I fall face first into ice, both refreshingly and narrowly avoiding fresh bile.

Fists full of snow as I steady myself - somehow an inhale grants instant relief. The marrow in my bones stops shivering on the second breath. I am able to push myself onto all fours on the third. The first thing to focus in view are the backs of my hands: yep. Still have skin. Braid whipping around, the sky draws upward; a mix of flurries and indigo.

Heaving, I push myself back onto my knees. Slow, as if made of old bones. Looking down once more, the reflective screen of my phone glints in snow. Off, likely dead. I pocket it. How my things survived the shockwave is a question for later.

Lungs working for the most part and hands buried deep in pockets for warmth, I loose a great sigh as I survey the damage from the blast. Or would have. Instead of ruin, there are snow dunes, no hot springs, and suddenly a mountain range. The landscape isn't anything like Yellowstone. Maybe Colorado.

"Where...?" my voice is wiry and labored, as if unused.

Blizzard-bent wind whips at the exposed skin of my cheeks, but I am warm and thankful for the rusty colored parka and the heavy weight of my hiking pack. The only comforts in this situation. For a mild second, I think this just might be in the ninth layer of Hell. It passes quickly, as no one yet has come to tell me who I've betrayed.

With an inelegant push, I rise. A cumbersome effort, but I am able to find balance.

Huffing, I stand as straight as possible to sharpen my senses; it doesn't work. Instead, I acknowledge the fact that I am on a mountain at night in the middle of a blizzard after being blown apart. Perhaps shock dulls the emotions I think I should be experiencing.

One does begin to wriggle: true panic begins to well at the base of my chest. I do my best to stopper it by moving forward. The snow is just knee height, smooth and glittering. About 20 paces ahead there's a line broken into the snow… Tracks instead of footsteps. As if they'd been dragging their weight; behind each step is a spill of a bright red. Injured… blood.

Squinting past the flurries, only a few steps ahead of those trunchees is a man in... armor? Not just a helmet or a pauldron, but a full suit. He is on his hands and knees, the sway of waning consciousness about him. He struggles to stand, sinking only further down into the snow. Perhaps frostbite has settled in.

"Can you stand?" I force myself to bite out. The man's voice is muffled in the wind and I waddle through drifts to close the distance between us. Closer now, I grip the man's shoulder to yank him up, and relieved as he does his best to rise with the support. He slurs his speech. Maybe it's the helmet that obscures his voice.

After struggling to get him upright and failing despite the effort, I start at the clasps attached to real leather straps at his chest.
Having only seen suits of armor in the MIA, MET, and MOMA, it's a truly a fumbling experience in the middle of a snow storm to unrobe a man in armor. Bombs and blizzards, withstanding.

These awkward moments of cold ham-handing cause the man to speak again, yet it remains completely unintelligible. A head injury? No time. I'll freeze if we don't move.

He has long, black hair and a facial tattoo. His features are... uniquely arranged. Brown skin blue from the cold. Underneath the armor is little clothing, a long sleeved shirt and some cotton pants. Why? This metal is frozen solid enough to deliver frostbite. There’s a gash, deeply gouged in his side, tarred over. Black and ugly. ‘Holy shit’ is the only thing that comes to mind. In an awkward wobble, I pull off my pack to retrieve a mylar blanket to wrap the man up. His eyes roll into the back of his head, shuddering against what little warmth it provides.

Bracing for what's next - barely able to see myself, I kneel and begin to gather the freezing, bleeding little man.

I am not petite, nor am I physically weak. Five foot eight and of strong conglomeration of German, Russian, and French roots. The words slender or svelte will never be used in reference to me.

Even so, lifting the man is difficult; dead weight - and all muscle, at that. Or rather, soon to be dead weight. Fortunately, the man is able to adjust himself once slung over my shoulders. Not an easy feat for either. His limbs are sluggish. I stumble and nearly sink to my knees three times, but the fourth is when a modicum of stability arrives. The first real step is clumsy, his body a mylar worm sagging on my shoulders and pack.

In my second attempt to speak I fail to get sound out, my throat too weak in a variety of ways.

And so I walk. And walk. And walk. Until all feeling has left my limbs.

As the winds quell, and visibility rises, murky thoughts lift into questions: How long have I been out here? How long has he?

The pool of questions rise as the ground under my feet begins to slope - a descent. Wasn't counting this time and am now aware that I've lost track of how long we've spent moving, poorly, down the mountain. Had we been walking for a few minutes? Half an hour? Hours?

The exposed skin along my face and wrists stiffens with each step. The man has fully slipped into unconsciousness, body still and silent. I yearn to do the same… Until, In the distance, a flicker of light. Then a warm, inviting orange glow. There's the knee-jerk reaction of joy when safety is just several paces off, but I resist giving in to excitement. It could be only a beacon. A mile marker.

And so, I walk straight into a campsite. There are people, shadows, figures, shapes...

One comes running. A blur of beige and green. Others join.

Voices call out. Still can't understand what's being said. Maybe I'm the one with the brain injury.

Before the beige green blur reaches the man and I, my legs give underneath the weight. Hands on my shoulders save a fall face first. The voice of a man?

This time, darkness is exactly what it should be: relief.

I don't even have to count.
A suffocating tightness jolts me aware, but not fully awake. That constriction exits my chest slow. As if the feeling were a snake slithering out my arms and through my fingertips. In their absence, my entire body throbs with... a *want*, before dissipating. Taking in a deeper breath to heave a sigh, I fail instead with a whimper. A little too pitiful, a little too breathy. Opening my eyes is no where near as impossible as it had been before. A soft yellow flash, pupils adjusting, and I am met with a tawny backdrop that billows with the sound of a bitter wind… A tent?

Despite the strain in my neck, I turn my head, vision still blurry. Worry at the thought of broken glasses.

A lamp burns bright in the corner, perched on a misshapen wooden box. The blob of bright oranges and teals signify my jacket and hiking pack just below. Everything else remains unfamiliar.

A voice calls from my side, soft but male. Turning further reveals the owner. The hazy outline of a man, hairless and in a beige sweater. Strange necklace. He is incredibly close, his knee brushing my shoulder. Shadows engulf his face.

"Where am I?" My swallow is thick, and I'm left in wondering the last time I'd drank anything. The man shifts, hairless head tilting. No response. In attempting to rise, the man presses me back down. His touch is strange - skin on skin? Looking down - I'm half covered with a blanket, topless save for a black bralette. A bandage of some kind covers my left pectoral - the source of the most immediate ache. Although being half nude in the presence of a stranger is worrisome, fatigue and disorganized thinking takes precedence.

"My glasses, can I have them?" As I point to my eyes, the obscured features on the man's face shift. It takes a few moments, but the man complies, craning around. Small shuffling sounds of wood and metal clink together as he rifles. His movements are quiet, careful. Despite not having seen his face, the weight of judgement is about him as he turns back to pass the frames.

The tortoiseshell hinges creak as they open, my fingers still shaking. I stare at the back of my hands. Being able to reflect now, I could have sworn it had melted from the bone. That I hadn't any hands at all before the mountain.

Surveying the tent with more clarity. It has seen better days - the tarp made of a thick linen rather than plastic. It is spacious, enough room for several people to fit inside upright. Several wooden boxes and a metal chest sit to the sides, along with my brightly colored belongings.

The bald man clears his throat, an impatient tone. It is difficult to hide the surprise now that I see him fully. I gawk, really. His face is… long. Almost *inhuman*. Sharp cheekbones and small, smokey eyes. Broad brow. Perhaps a genetic mutation?
"Where am I? Do you speak English?" as I ask, it's a slow realization that he's yet to respond to anything said thus far. His unreadable expression darkens. Briefly, I wonder deliriously, if he's an imp or devil. Instead of the betrayer's hell, maybe this is purgatory? Is it possible that I am really dead? Did devils and demons actually exist? I have never died before so if I am dead, this certainly isn't what I expected. Perhaps this is an extreme stream of consciousness and I, for some reason, am envisioning unnervingly featured bald men in my last moments.

The man now speaks, but it is in a language I don't understand or even recognize.

I give it another angle, "Peut-être Français?"

My beginner’s French is seven years unused, rusty nowhere beginning to describe my skills. But desperation ignores poor pronunciation. My desperate, misplaced hope is that his unique features denote a European.

He shakes his head as if to say no, then extends a finger towards my glasses. A long nail taps just the corner of my frames. I say nothing, yet he assumes my silence for permission and lifts them off.

With a delicate hand, he snaps them shut and sets them beside his folded legs. He pushes himself closer, my shoulder fitting into the v-shaped space between his knees. This exchange is completely wordless, relying on gestures. He motions for me to close my eyes, his index and middle finger drawing downwards in front of his own.

In complying with this odd request, his cool fingers find my face, without a stranger's hesitation. Thumbs over eyelids, index and middle hooked under my jaw on both sides. So swift, in fact, that in a panic, I grab his boney wrists to push him off. He stays, murmuring calm reassurance.

Alright, then.

Rather than thrash, I lay still in uncertainty. Too stunned that this is happening, it takes a moment to begin asking "What are you-"

An unpleasant sensation, not unlike the suffocation that woke me minutes earlier, fills both orbital sockets. Then, some place behind that space is a hard, sudden pinch and a pressurized push. Optic nerve? Gasping in pain and shock, I shove his hands off.

"What was that?!" I snap, sitting upright to face him. As quickly as it came, my anger fades. The bald man is perfectly clear, appearing as if I had offended him. I blink, then vigorously rub my eyes before looking again. He was clear. Boy, was he clear.

From each dark hair on his brow, to the small scar on his forehead, to the blue veins spreading from his bruised eyes, and to the umber jawbone hanging around his neck, all in detail. Even before spectacles I'd never seen with such clarity. A few stinging tears dribble as I reach for my glasses, shoving them on to survey. The lenses now worsen my vision to near blindness. I do a few sweeps around the tent to confirm.

Slipping them off the backs of my ears, I give the bald man a narrow stare, one he returns with interest and a rigid spine. This stark language barrier is getting in the way of answers. I need to communicate somehow.

My attention falls to the corner of the tent where my belongings sit. Compared to the brown drab and flickering shadows of the tent, the jacket and pack are garrish. The vibrant pigments of the green and teal Kelty Coyote are normally pleasing, but appear pasted onto the sorrowful drab of the tent. My parka fares no better.
Pointing to my bag in hopes the bald man will know to pull it over. Although his expression dour, he nods as he rises to stand on bare feet. Shivering at the sight of how naked his soles are, I pull the rough, wooly blanket around my own bare shoulders. The bald man's movements are tight and quick. He lugs the 40 pound pack and my parka with far more ease than I would have known to expect.

"Thank you," I say while sinking my hand into one of the jackets front pockets as he sets the rest down. My foggy memory tells me it should be in there. Grasping at the firm, rectangular shape, I’m met, thankfully, with the sight of that dull pink phone case.

I didn't remember checking if it were still alive on the mountain and tentatively press the power button. It takes a moment, but the screen flickers. The glow seems unnatural compared to the soft yellow of the lamp. A picture of my cat stares back.

The bald man murmurs as he kneels again, leaning in to peer at the screen. Ignoring him a moment - too invested in figuring out where I am.

In the upper right of the screen it reads 23% battery life. The time read as 2:59p, December XX.

I frown at the upper right corner that reads 'No Service,'

Hovering my thumb above the home button on the base, the home screen unlocks. Opening a few applications, from GPS to the compass to Siri, none work save for those with content installed. It was a dangerous thing to reply only on a phone for survival which is why I had... maps!

There were two in the bottom pocket of my pack, one of the United States and one of the World. I toss my phone to my side and hoist my pack closer. The bald man seems to recoil a bit at the sound of the zipper being undone, but I continue to pay him little mind once I have the US map in my hands. Unfolding it, clumsily in my haste, the bald man scoots closer yet. Turning to him, our shoulders nearly colliding, I point to the map roughly in the vicinity of Yellowstone National Park.

"This is where I last remember being, where are we now?" I ask. His face is a hard canvas to read - A variety of expressions color him as he gingerly picks up the edge of the map, his eyes scanning it longer than maybe necessary.

"Well...?" I sigh, hoping he'd point out where we were. Perhaps further down into the Rocky's? That would explain the difference in cold and that mountain... His eyes shift back up to mine. We are close enough that I can count the eyelashes that rim his lids. In this proximity, I realize his ears are long and pointed, much like his general set of features.

In the mental haze, I touch them before I even realize I am doing so. The tip is soft, firm, such as cartilage is. Not latex, definitely a surgical procedure for them to be this pointed. Slipping behind the shell of his ear, no scarring. Good doctor, perhaps.

Again, before my mind makes note, the man's cold touch pulls my hand away - his grip firm but not forceful. He has one brow raised high, his expression clearly, at last, reading a strong 'what are you doing?'

He opens his mouth to say something but closes it again, setting my hand in my lap. He rises, the edge of the map fluttering with his movement.

Looming, hardness and confusion painting him, we stare at each other until he turns to exit the tent.

I push the map to the side, not bothering to fold it. I start searching for the geology compass in the same pocket. At least to figure out which direction was North. Gripping around the small metal
"What the fuck," I sigh as I toss it back into the pocket, just as the bald man to return with several others. Two women and two men in addition to the bald man.

They wear strange clothing and armor… I recognize one, the man I had found in snow. He isn’t wearing a helmet, but is back in a breastplate. Tan skin, impossibly large eyes that nearly glow, and a thick long black braid. He was of compact Olympian build and boyishly handsome despite his face being… off. It was similar to the bald man’s in some way I could not yet describe.

The second man stands behind him, mountainous with feathers hugging a thick neck. Above the feathered cowl is a set of rugged features. Messy blonde hair slicked back and bags under his eyes that cried for sleep far more than my own fatigue did. Even so, the bags did not compare to the under eye bruises of the bald man.

The women beside them were tall, one muscular with dark hair and serious brows. Her skin is tan with eyes like fire. A scar gouges her left cheek. Anger and confusion seem to color her features. The other woman is hooded, but there are glimpses of auburn hair and glittering eyes. Despite the black-haired woman being visibly angered, this woman reads more intimidating.

The black-haired woman walks forward, her speech sounds different than the bald man, but it is still nothing I recognize. Her broad shoulders sag and she huff before tossing a silent gaze back to the red head.

"Do any of you speak English? Français?" I ask again, hopeful that any of them knew something that we could parse together, even if poorly.

They all stare as if I had spit fire, the lot remaining silent. The bald man is the only one to move forward, a stained, brown roll of paper in his hands. Movements graceful, he kneels down and extends the roll to me. Unfurling it, I take in an immaculately drawn map, though smudged from use. A point to a space next to a well-drawn mountain range, saying one word as he did so. "Fereldan."

"Thedas?" He seems to ask after the time spent in silence.

I shrug and shake my head - maybe this was a place remote, somewhere I wasn't thinking. None of the landmarks on the brown paper were ones that I knew, but I would try to compare, find it somewhere.

It has to be somewhere.

Opening the World, the crinkle of the paper far louder in the silence between the five strangers and I.

I show it to the bald man again.

I gesture first to the United States on the first map, then point to it on the World. With brows high and the same unreadable expression as before, Bald man says nothing and instead beckons to the black-haired woman.

Black Hair's metal armor clanks as she moves. Once near, she folds down on one knee to pull the world map with a quick swipe. Holding the map an arms width apart, her face is far easier to read. Anger falling confusing rising.

The silence in the large tent between these six strangers is growing thicker. The sense of panic that was minor before rising higher in the pit of my gut.
Having not been given any answers and having no way to communicate with these people, I try to stand, my legs shakier than expected. This causes the bald man to come to my side again. I protest and stand anyway, wobbling for a few moments, steadying with the assistance of Bald Man’s grip upon my shoulder.

The men at the entrance of the tent murmured and half-turn, perhaps due to being toplless. Several moments pass before Bald man pulls his eyes away, hand slipping away secondarily. Quickly, and ignoring the women who look on, I pull on my parka and move outside the tent.

It is December, so in the northern hemisphere, based roughly on my last known location, I should be able to make out...

Gasping, I stumble over a drift of snow. In a rich and luminescent night sky sits not one, but two moons.

"What…" panicked again, I start rapidly searching the sky, for anything I can recognize from the Northern Hemisphere. Constellations Aquila, Sagittarius… Hell, the North Star…. It doesn’t look anything like the Southern Hemisphere, either.

Above me is a night sky I had never seen before - the star patterns of complete unfamiliarity, reminiscent of neither Northern or Southern Hemispheres. A notion that terrifies more than it excites.

A hand grasps at my shoulder; cold fingers seep through the warmth of my parka. I turn to the Bald Man. He gestures towards the tent, but I shake from his grip before he finishes. His expression too calm and unflinching.

"Where am I?!!" whatever composure I had begin to unravel, panic beginning to spill from my eyes. Death is supposed to be infinite nothingness. Mr. Hawking once said that. The Bald Man's expression is clear a second time: sympathetic.

He begins to speak but my attention is pulled towards a glow in the corner of my vision.

Part of me expects Aurora Borealis given the light and direction, but instead a massive storm swirls, ominous and overwhelming. It’s putrid and verdant simultaneously. Radioactive harlequin tendrils poison the cumulonimbus formations. Between the shocks of lightening, a space within the sky pulses that impossible green.

Staring directly into it causes my chest to ache and throb. A sound catches, and I’m pulled to ground level. The surrounding area is covered in tents and small campfires. There are no electrical sources of light – no noises aside from the crackling of burnt wood and the coughing of spent lungs. People are bruised and broken, laying on cots or on the snow – some are covered with layers of linen stained even more than the tents surrounding.

A smell greets me– the kind that is of flesh rotting. I had only known that smell from animal carcasses. This was sharper and more curdled, cloying. Though I’ve no experience - it is an immediate knowing. The scent of humans decaying. My throat seizes as I whip towards the Bald Man to avoid memories of broadcasted bodies burnt to sacks of blisters. Inconveniently sequestered in the back of mind.

What I know is that I am displaced. I do not know if I'm dreaming. I do not know if I am dead. I do not have the capacity to question in this moment.

Allowing the Bald Man to pull me back inside, the red headed woman greets me first. She is beautiful, eyes probing. She is more unreadable than the Bald Man.
"Leiliana," her voice is melodious. She wears pale leathers and a thin, delicate finger points to her chest. This must be her name. She repeats it, nodding as she does so.

"Mahanon" the armored man sticks his thumb to his chest, his movements clanking.

"Cassandra," The black-haired woman closes the distance, her eyes now full of concern instead of anger.

"Cullen," the rugged, feathered man. His eyes are cast to the ground.

"Solas," The bald man speaks, his hand still cool and gripping.

In any event such as this, names are a start. "Andromeda Delamarq,"
Incompassionate

Chapter 3

Incompassionate

Clark Ashton Smith - Fire of Snow

Pale fire of snow had lit the dusk for me:
Astray with mind half-consciously intent
I had not thought the wood so imminent—
Pregnant with pine and sombre cypress-tree.
Darker than sleep, and mute with mystery
Like far-off death, where questing dreams are spent,
Their winding caverns deepened as I went
Therein, and paused in old expectancy.

Pale fire of snow had lit the dusk for me....
But the black stillness held where once the wind
Had parted boughs in music, that the gleam
Of stars might enter; all was strangely blind,
Like midnight thickening 'neath the middle sea—
Filled with the silence of a time-slain dream.

Not a trick of the mind nor wistful yearning; it is my power edging closer. Dull in radiance, yet not lost as I feared. Threading through the camp in the direction it dimly pulses, I hone in on a new sensation - a sound. Not one placeable. Not music or a voice... But that of a rush of energy, the clash of a waterfall upon stone, gales ripping through verdant trees, the rumble of earth shifting below, various moments. It pulses once more, a peculiar sound begging curiosity, and I sprint towards the edge of the encampment. Forty paces off, at the warded barriers, a figure in a boxy coat the color of autumn stumbles through thigh-high drifts. Their hood is drawn, back bowed underneath a burden wrapped in thin glistening metal. Dangling around the figure's shoulder is the pale green glow of an attempt incredibly ill conceived by more than one.

"Herald!" despite all my devices, I am still capable of panic, confusion, and concern. All three erupt, intertwining, as I fly forward; relief at the sight of that power-bitten hand. For him, I care little. As long as he lives.

The figure starts to stumble without the support of snow. The others: The Seeker, the Commander, The Nightingale see and follow suit.

"Mahanon!" Cassandra cries out, seeing the shock of black hair sway in time with the figure's steps.

The figure falls to their knees just as my hand reach for- It is a woman. The combined weight of her, Mahanon, and a massive and oddly blue-green pack on her back, cause me to sink with them in a slump. Grasping at her shoulders to keep them both upright, it's quick acknowledgement that her body is thick and fertile. Wisps of yellow hair peak from underneath the hood, a braid the length of my arm and the width of my wrist hangs to her midsection.
It is then the others arrive; the Commander, skidding to a halt underneath his great weight and armor, pulls Mahanon from the woman's shoulders. I remain supporting as they peel the metal, like paper, away from his body. He is alive, breathing. The mark pulses in tandem with the white noise, calm.

"State your name!" Cassandra commands, her voice both cracking and booming to the audience that had grown behind the scene. Her hand has found her hilt as quickly as an untrained mabari might. The woman does not comply, head lolling forward.

A roll of the eyes is all I grant the Seeker. Gently pushing the stiff autumnal hood back, I take in the one before me.

"Maker," Cullen curses. "Just a girl... Or..." he drifts down to her body, the youthful appearance not in sync with the ample form. "A woman?"

Behind spectacles is a round face with long eyes set wide. Pink, rounded ears tell of her humanity, if subtle.

It is she who emits the sound.

"Andromeda Delamarq," she says, an introduction on a dulcet tone.

Mahanon steps near, his glowing palm clasping the woman's shoulder opposite the one I hold. Here, he bestows an awkward pat, cracking a cumbersome smile, as the threads of Elgar'nan twist at his jaw. Perhaps this is his thanks, perhaps it is to lull the woman down from her scaling panic.

"Does anyone know what she's speaking?" he asks the counsel now, turning first to his Seeker. Crags of his physical injury still hide his usual puckish sneer.

"I do not recognize it," Cassandra responds as she folds her arms over her chest. Her iconic mixture of saintly retribution is written upon a heavy brow. Silent, the woman named Andromeda shifts between Mahanon and Cassandra as she composes herself, wiping the few fallen tears away.

Waves of some unidentifiable energy thrum from her in slow, languid waves, neither positive or negative. This signature had dulled after her arrival and as she slept, but now returns, gentle and constant. Perhaps a force mage of unusual talents, but the barriers... and inability to find a sleeping mind within the Fade. To say this is of concern would be understating it grievously.

"The Anchor..." Mahanon speaks, withdrawing his palm. "Touching her... soothes it?" His gazing at the anchor earns a dazed murmur from Andromeda. To watch her is to witness someone see with their given eyes for the first time, literally. Before I could explore their shape, she resisted as if having never experienced healing.

Small fingers reach out for Mahanon's hand. To my own surprise, he allows her touch. She turns it over gently to inspect his knuckles. Her handling is the same in which she explored my ears minutes earlier, gentle and inquisitive. A few more murmurs in her strange tongue and she releases Mahanon. More enamored and perplexed by the mark than frightened.

Mahanon places the anchor back on her shoulder, giving her a small squeeze, earning him a wary, yet silent, response. "She feels... different... Is she a Mage?" He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, attempting his best to read apologetic as he withdraws his hand. Mahanon every much the elven warrior he sets to be: completely unversed in the Fade, and the power within this palm.

"In truth, Herald, I do not know..." I stare down my nose to assess the odd assortment of clothing, name, and appearance of this Andromeda. It's with bitter acknowledgement that I possess less faculty
than before; to hear a language unheard despite the ages spent listening, watching, reading. Perhaps even irritation. Such emotion is to be hidden, of course, as negative traits for an apostate within an inquisition that seeks to enslave its mages is a dangerous display. Curiosity is in second seat to annoyance and I rely on that to convince those around that this deep interest is benign concern, not steeped paranoia.

Any state of slumber is prime opportunity to explore and learn. I would have done so with this Andromeda... Instead, she is without a trace despite that ever-constant vibration. A moment, in her stirring, a blip of some presence in the Fade dissipated within seconds as I'd sought to heal, or circumvent that blackened bite on her shoulder. It was, that fleeting thing, a blinding barrier. Sterile, white, resistant. Unseeable.

Her lack of trade tongue simply provides yet another obstacle. Answers will need to be earned if she is to survive long enough, which the chances may be scaled in her favor. The numerous religious had been witness to her self-sacrificing entrance; her long golden hair, the Herald of Andraste slung over her shoulder, and a sense of 'otherliness' all they need to spark whispering within their shadows.

The snapping of Mahanon's fingers rein in my attention.

"Apologies, merely thinking," I say, tone as distant as the thoughts that lead elsewhere.

"I was asking about magic or enchantments that can translate and if you know of any?" Mahanon asks again.

With a shake of my head, I say "I have heard tales," Of items and spells and trinkets... If... one in particular still rests in Skyhold, then perhaps I may seek its use. Skyhold, of which I must speak with the Herald, and soon.

"Blood magic, known for binding spells that bestow knowledge upon the caster, could potentially be of use," hesitating at the bristling of every individual in the tent, save for Andromeda who peers around as if lost. The notion of utilizing magic to affect the way the physical mind worked is, and can be, dangerous even when pulling away from the Fade.

"While other resources exist, I think immediate action would be unwise as I have not been able to reach her in the Fade. It is as if she is hidden." I pause, finally withdrawing my own hand from her shoulder. Revealing mention of the emission of benign energy unwise in this moment if they are not yet aware.

"Hiding? Protecting herself? If that's true, then how is she not a mage?" Cassandra's tone is more of a growl and I stare back, pursing my lips. I understand what the Herald saw in this Cassandra, but that did not earn my approval.

"I did not explicitly say she is not. Simply, if she is, she is trained outside my own experience." This tone is perhaps more bitter than I intend as the Seeker immediately withdraws, arms tightening over her chest.

"I took the liberty of caring for her while she slept - Perhaps we could speak further with Vivienne, Dorian, or even Cole..." The utterance of the new found spirit's name causes further bristling, Cassandra growling and Cullen shifting in his piles of armor.

"What could that demon do that a mage couldn't?" Cassandra's voice is curt, disapproving since Mahanon had accepted him into the ranks. Despite the fact that Compassion risked itself to warn of Corypheus' attack.
"Spirits offer numerous facets of knowledge. Cole's ability seems to be a particularly effective one." It is imperative to maintain a sense of frigidity to combat the heat of the Seeker.

"And if she's a spy?" Cullen asks, which elicits a snort from Mahanon.

"Does this wide-eyed, pretty plump thing seem like a spy to you? Likely more like noble, or a noble's pampered slave," Mahanon gestured to Andromeda's form with a sweep of his eyes.

While wide hips and a round bottom are to be admired if concerned with surface level traits (which Andromeda owns in spades), it is her features that garner attention. Admitted to no one, even I can appreciate the finer, softer flesh of this human.

Interrupted in the midst of this perusal, Mahanon adds thoughtlessly "And after Haven, why would a spy risk her life to save me?"

"Who wouldn't risk their life to save you, Herald?" Cullen asks, as if the statement absurd. "You, quite literally, hold the world in your left hand."

Before rebuttal from anyone returns, The Spymaster shifts.

"It is unlikely she is an agent. Her appearance too easily remembered; employing her for any level of work would be difficult," Leiliana speaks for the first time since naming herself. The Nightingale does well in the donning of impassiveness, though there are small tells to give away her surprise. "It is difficult to lie with so much physical evidence proving how…" She pauses as her eyes probe for answers not yet given "Foreign she is. Have you not looked within the Fade, Solas? Surely, those maps can't be real. Illuminated illustrations,"

The Nightingale and I enter a deadlock, her unwavering expression upon me now. It is rare that we share word, something I suspect both to prefer. She is one of the sharpest that stands within this tent and the one I consistently evade.

"I have. My efforts return nothing worthy." an unfortunate and unnerving truth.

Andromeda silently brushes past Mahanon and kneels to fold up the massive, overly articulate maps on paper as thin as spiderweave. She mutters, rubbing the remaining tears away and heeding no mind to those that stare. Dazed, yet.

"Those maps, even if only illustrations, are nothing like I've ever seen... The rest?" Cassandra pulls her gaze up, arms still folded over her chest, her height nearly that of my own as we deadlock.

"They are unique, as are the rest of her belongings," Linking my fingers behind my back, I tip my head to observe Andromeda pick up the pink slate. A pinched brow as she pokes the glowing window. It responds to each touch she gives it, a ghastly light illuminating pale skin. Briefly, I wonder, if it is a kind of advanced shaperate stone. Cullen and Mahanon exchange glances before turning back.

"Various trinkets and pieces of equipment. Such as a crystal skull filled with what I assume to be potent liquor, strange contraptions made with a material that is not metal, stone, nor fabric - a casein resin that does not rot. That slate she's holding now? I attempted to activate it, but it seems to respond only to her touch." Mahanon "hmm's in acknowledgement, "The eyewear she wore, not unlike the dwarven make we've seen on Master Tethras, was presumably her main method of sight. I offered to repair her eyes as a gesture. She passively accepted, but was not overly fond of the process." If a forcible recoil and the expulsion of my aura were any indication.

"So, if she's not connected to the Fade, doesn't dream, possesses strange belongings, and wears
dwarven spectacles...?" Cullen finally regarded the woman now that she had her back to him and no additional flesh visible. While he is a skilled tactician, there are moments such as this when subtle logic escapes him. I fight hard to avoid an eye roll.

"You're not suggesting she's a large dwarf, are you?" Mahanon's laugh is hoarse yet incredulous. "She's got the face of an elf, the height of a human, and the form of a dwarf. Maybe she's just a tiny Qunari."

Cullen stiffens and grumbles at Mahanon's teasing, brows knitting "I do not know how to piece together who she is beyond the strange evidence before us. It seems to me that our Fade Expert should have something, yet for all the dreaming he does, he's also without." While there is a trifle of narrow hostility, I do not dissuade the former templar's claim as he is not incorrect.

The sound of rifling draws attention back to Andromeda. She searches for something around the bedroll- ah, her clothing. Cullen sputters as she shoulders off her coat, skin smooth, luminous, and free of all scarring. She faces away as she pulls the stretchy, inky tunic over her head, tucking it into the hem of skin-tight pants. Despite that unusual liquid-like fabric clinging to every abundant curve, the only skin visible is her face and hands. It is as she begins slipping on the black leather boots, once more donning her autumn coat, I realize she is going to try to exit.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Mahanon snaps, darting to pull the large, and exceptionally cyan, bag behind himself before she stoops to lift it.

"You can't leave," he says as he, easily, lifts her pack away to Cullen. Andromeda bites her lower lip, scanning the rest of the tent's inhabitants. Cullen and Cassandra are the peak image of domination, unaware of their faint scowls as they wear them often. Cassandra is easily more intimidating than Cullen. Leiliana stares as if she were a strange beast. Mahanon has one arm jut out to corral a possible escape. It does not come to that as her shoulders slump in resignation.

The tension passes, and Leiliana speaks. "What this means is that we have an unknown in our possession- the few agents that have reported back since last night, none have intel on someone who fits her description. She may not be a spy, but there is more to learn. How she came to be on the mountain - we must know why. It is best to survey for the time being," Leilana sounds firm on this command as she folds her hands in front of herself. "And, after all, she did save your life, Mahanon,"

The look she and Mahanon and Cassandra exchange speaks silent volumes known only to them.

Andromeda regards those that stand between her and escape, expression mingled with fear and confusion. We lock eyes at last, and I frown to abstain from being her savior, merely a keeper.

"I will guide her, bring her to food and drink," I offer for several reasons, though the hope is that the counsel will see it as a way to allow them further rest. Since Mahanon had woke just an hour or so earlier, they had tended to the injured and assisted in setting up camp. They had not yet taken time to lick their own wounds.

"Andromeda," I extend my hand in front of myself, sidestepping to indicate her following. Pushing back the tent's doorway to signify my wish for her to draw forward. She understands as she reluctantly edges forward, eyes cast downward. She exits but stops just within reach.

"Thank you, Solas." Mahanon nodded and I do so in kind to respond as I let the front flap of the tent drop, leaving the four of them to converse further.

"Herald," with a dip of the head, I back out, the tent flapping shut.
Turning to Andromeda, I find her as I had moments earlier. It is not the breach scar or remnant smaller rifts that remain that her wide eyes rove, but at the Moon and Satine. Separate from the administrators - Josephine absent due to the many drafts and requests the Inquisition now requires - I allow her these passing moments. Tears threaten again, but do not fall as she brings her gaze to the ground, observing the wounded and the camp fires as if they were strange, foreign concepts.

Fade-touched, some might say. While there is hope that too much exposure to the Fade's raw energies would be the reason, I cannot commit to such a diagnosis.

"Come," Attempting to calm by placing a comforting touch at the small of her back, it instead lands with the opposite effect. A visible, tense fear twists about her, her body stiffening. It had been ages since I'd bestowed such unsolicited, immediate fright. The sensation of such fear bristling and not as vindicating as remembered. This sudden aversion to touch, despite fondling ears and power-bitten hands, worrisome in certain ways.

Moving ahead one pace ahead to grant some distance, I'm confident that even if she intends to, she would never succeed in outrunning. As if the further proximity freed her, those soft shoulders relax and she finally turns her gaze. She speaks, but the thick, undulating sounds, round consonants, and sharp vowels mean nothing. I take a step through the snowbank ahead and motion for her to follow.

Since waking, I've grown more attuned to the needs of a body once more and find myself hungry, as well. In the center of the encampment, a swirl of tents, cots, and broken bodies, are a few aging women, all three elvish but not Elvhen. None wear the Vallaslin. Despite the lacking provisions, they have fashioned a stew in the one massive wrought iron pot saved from the crushing of Haven. While much isn't required to sate, the bland, spiceless scent invigorates an appetite.

"Two helpings, if there is some to spare,"

"Of course, ser," she responds as she stoops over, wooden dishes in her hands, to scrub them out with clean snow. In moments, she passes two bowls each with a sliver of hard tack in them to thicken the mixture.

I turn to Andromeda to find her staring past me and at the older women. She speaks, to herself at this point, and goes up to touch her ears, batting away a few wild golden curls to do so. With a tapered finger, Andromeda points to my ears then to the older women, perplexed but not hostile. Each have their hair in tightly braided buns, ears on prominent display.

"Elf," I say, my lips forming to a thin line.

"Elf," She repeats, then points to another elvish woman "Elf?" her voice lilts upwards to question. I nod, lifting a brow.

She points to a dwarf warrior waddling by in heavy plate, "Elf?" she speaks, pointing to the veritable wall of a dwarf.

My mouth opens and I am rendered a momentary loss of words. "Dwarf," I finally find.

She scans the camp, dwarves sadly a scant few in the Inquisition, warranting scrambles for lyrium connections. "Dwarf?" she points as one emerges from a tent, Lace Harding in her kind, attractive smiles.

I nod, very much aware that the women behind me are silently observing this scenario. "Dwarf? Elf?" she points to herself. Though there's no way in knowing the appearance of it, I'm sure the fine line of my mouth contorts a moment before another frown spreads. One of the women chuckles and
"Human," I resign in offering her one of the two wooden bowls. A small creeping doubt begins; I do not know if human is the right application here.

"Eat," I pull the hard tack, half soaked, and take a small bite. Andromeda's expression changes as she raises what I believe to be a skeptical brow. Smirk replacing the frown, a small wish to share an agreement. Our conversation mostly visual cues, I motion towards crates surrounding a fire with space for bodies. Andromeda follows, disorientation in her features rising. Lowering myself down onto a stack of crates, Andromeda hesitates before taking space.

"Ah, finally awake. Get her to talk yet, Chuckles?" Varric, always a smooth entrance, strides near the fire. He had also found himself with a bowlful of what I now know to be a scant fennec broth. Taking a seat on the crate opposite, the flames illuminate his firm features, jewelry glinting in the fire with each of his robust movements.

"If only it were possible - she does not seem to know the trade tongue or much else," Rather than lament over the thin tasteless stew, I welcome a conversational partner.

"Did you try to speak to her in any other language? Trade tongue isn't an obligation, just convenient," his rasping voice questions as he wriggles to make himself comfortable against the stacked crates.

"If she had been speaking something I recognized," I chew on the bland mixture, peering through the flames towards, perhaps, the only companion I regarded with an ounce of trust. "I would have sought someone to translate by now. Regardless, our first concern isn't that she doesn't know trade but instead that she cannot discern the difference between the elves, dwarves, and humans around her, or herself from them."

"Uh... How so?" Varric shifts, one hand on his knee as he flickers between Andromeda and I.

"Observe the way she stares," Varric turns fully to watch- After several moments, his mouth parts in a chuckle in realization. With each passing non-human, Andromeda's head cranes to watch them move - expression pained and lost.

"Huh. Maybe getting stuck out in the cold with only Chops for company pulled a screw loose." he hums aloud, giving the blonde a thoughtful stare. "Just wait until she sees a Vashoth. What's her name?"

"Andromeda," I reply, lifting the bowl to my mouth to drink again, the sensation of Andromeda perking against the crates. Varric waves, a welcoming smile enveloping his broad face.

"Hello," his thick hand gives a small wave and his smile is warm enough to inspire one in me. If there were anyone to ease her, it will be Master Tethras.

She parrots his motion, a small hand lifting to wave back. With her attention on Varric, I see her stew untouched.

"That accent," Varric whispers to himself as she speaks a few words in her own tongue, bowing her head to him. "You weren't kidding. I don't think I've ever heard that before, and I've heard... a lot. Where are you from, gorgeous?" he shook his own head at the forced rhetorical.

"Introductions were made by saying our own names aloud," I add before setting on Andromeda. Calling her name pulls her over, eyes serious and soft. Reaching over to tap the edge of her bowl, I motion to her mouth. While I find myself in agreement with refusing this bland attempt at food,
abstaining isn’t the viable option. Her nose wrinkles, likely at the blatant lack of smell, as she lifts it and pulls a small drink. The disgust grows into a grimace and she groans quietly. Varric laughs.

"Maybe a Tevinter noble's pet with those delicate sensibilities." He continues to chuckle as he calls her name for her attention. "Andromeda meet Varrie" he juts his free thumb to his chest and nods. Proving to be somewhat quick, she responds with a heavily lilted reversal - "Varrie meet Andromeda," Her voice is smokey, practiced.

Varric nods as he crunches through the last of his hard tack. "Is it possible she's an escaped slave? If she is, someone is probably very angry that she's missing," his proposal is a valid one - one that had crossed my mind as well.

"I had shown the books she had in her possession to one of Iron Bull's chargers, the one from Tevinter, as well as Dorian. Neither recognized the writing. Both were entranced by how fine the print and how thick the book, however," Varric's sharp dwarven eyes glitter at any mention of publishing and production.

"You'll have to show me some time - the print shops my publisher uses are crude and costly. I've been telling them that they can make it smaller and more concise!" he speaks rhetorically to Andromeda who is unawares that she's being spoken to. Instead, she's focused on stirring her food with the hardtack. I keep watch until the weight of my stare brings her to take another remorseful drink.

Varric continues to talk, the topic changing to the state of the Inquisition's forces, morale, and how long it would take to migrate to the next station...

As I listen to him, exchanging what thoughts and assurances I have, knowing that Skyhold will suit the Inquisition's every need, the shape of Cole floats in my periphery. His boney body slouches half in shadow. If it were not for his warning a lot more would have been lost. He seems to stare at Andromeda, his pale, opaline eyes wide, lips moving as he mutters to himself. Concentrating on his murmurings, I tune out the noise around me while feigning attention on the conversation between Varric and myself.

"Closed off, can't see. Too much pain. So many, it's a hunger, a pulling, it wants, but it's not like Hunger. Bigger..." His mumbling is far more coherent than our first meetings and fear lines his voice. "Stop looking at me, I'm helping," his voice is a demanding, angry, and desperate whisper as he fades back into the shadows.

A blanching sideways glance reveals Andromeda peering in the direction of Cole's shadow.
Chapter Notes

Listen to Definizione dell'impossibile while reading this chapter to help set the mood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 4

Neverending Dreams

Log - Observation

Always been able to wake up from lucid dreams. Easy.

Can’t. Tried. All ‘day’.

There’s a wound; it doesn’t hurt, but the one named Solas does something.

Painful. Ride it out. Do what you can.

If you wake up, you wake up. If you die, you die.

Despite what looks like famine, everything is... big. Test air quality? Seems richer than 21% oxygen.

The sky is fucked up - need to know what kind of emissions those are.

Waking in that same tawny tent does not bring relief and instead paramount dread.

I’d dreamt within the dream of a black ocean upon which I was aimless and disembodied. A glowing world, Earth, above. Other dreams had passed, but the black ocean remains.

The sound of people talking quietly just outside; feminine and masculine alike. There’s no way to understand them in their hushed conversations. I hear a word that I mistake as my name. “Andraste” they whisper.

The smell… the smell of the sick, the smell of the dying, the smell of the dead all conglomerated into one. Pungent and stark. Resolve to explore comes eventually. The tent is warm, balmy, despite the snow. Outside the tent, brisk - patches of snow oddly melted in circular shapes. After wandering around the encampment at length, I feel more lost than when I started.

Light scatters in short wavelengths to create a sky of a magnificent, incredible cyan. Oxygen rich atmosphere; one reason why things seem so… large. At least breathing is an option. Trees - what could be a kind of pine, create a shelterbelt just behind jagged mountains, spanning farther than line of sight.

There is something off about the humans; eerily too similar to one another.
I have never been stared at the way these people stare at me.

The one called Solas approaches, gesturing to my shoulder and speaking in that soft, strange tone. Sharp teeth, hard not to stare at. His soothing voice and his withdrawn, calculated expression do not align. Motioning back to the tents, and unsure of what it is he intends, the only option is to follow. He stays two paces away. Underneath his gaze I do not feel entirely myself.

When he removes the bandage, I gasp.

A bruise so black it looks like ink paints my skin. Broken capillaries coil like vines around a puncture no wider than the barrel of a pencil.

No point in memory, except for that black place, alludes to this wound. It does not hurt. Solas does some strange invisible thing; his hands cold, finger tips smooth. And then it does hurt, but a pain from... a sensation. Like snakes or hands or clawing for a space that is supposedly empty. A twinge of hunger, the first time I’ve felt something… like… that...

Once again adrift, I find the women who served food from last night. Without knowing what else to attempt, I try to offer help. The other two disposed no desire to accept, they seem afraid. A redhead. Older, tan, thin yet square with long ears that stick out straight regard me with no fear as she hands me bottles. She tells me her name is Favrun, voice light and raspy.

I tell her mine and she shortens it to Andra.

We sit in silence and she allows me tears without judgement.

Until nightfall, I help her, wordlessly, tear apart plants. The first twenty or so are mangled, but in time I pull and tear in stride until there are several hundred fragrant leaves and associated roots.

“Elfroot,” she says, lifting one in her little gloved hand to pat my shoulder.

“Elfroot,” I repeat.

She smiles. I try.

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**Log - Question**

Can't eat. Can't sleep. Actions automated.

Bodily functions otherwise normal.

War - are these people at war?

If awake, where is this Thedas? Moons, stars, it’s all different.

Likely southern hemisphere.

Some stationary satellites… No way of viewing.

One of the moons… strange.
How could such a transition have taken place?

There was nowhere near enough energy or force to propel matter.

A ragged wooden cot supports a dying man. He has long ears. An elf. His stomach is flayed open, covered in a concave halo of soaked, stinking linen. The blood isn’t even red anymore; dried and oxidized. Sticks to his skin like brown tar. The smell… It’s a marvel he lived through the shock of receiving such an injury. It’s a marvel he’s alive at all. What dealt this kind of injury? No shrapnel.

People walk past, no one tends to him.

So I do.

I kneel beside his ragged cot to take his hand - this the only comfort I know how to give. Several corpses, some with horns, some stout, some with long ears, lay covered in the cots over. They had left with someone alongside them and so will he.

He cries as he speaks- his hands are calloused and bloody and scratch against mine; no one had bathed him even in his need. I rub his wrists and arms in slow, soothing circles as his breath begins to quiver. He asks something, throat thick. I cannot understand. As I try to shake my head to tell him this, I cry.

It is not because he is dying or because I am afraid of the sea of dead. Numbed to that now. I cry because I am reminded. If only they hadn’t been left alone. It’s because of - If I’d… If I’d waited until we hit Montana... They wouldn't... I was only gone for a few minutes...

The man smiles, his words unsteady and heavy in consonants. His dark skin colorless like grey silt, expression kind like buttery leather. It is the last thing he speaks as he sags away. Odd pupils bloom, consuming the violet iris as a last shivering breath leaves him. To watch someone pass, their last thought that you were crying for them a lie is yet another sensation I cannot compute.

As I close his eyes, I glance to see that I’m being watched. The one named Leiliana evaluates this transaction, mine and the dying man, with less emotion than a cement wall. Beside her is Cassandra, equally nebulous. Metal and leather pillars topped with imperious gazes.

Wiping the tears away and feigning ignorance of their attention, I stand to watch a man ride in on a monstrous horse. He's thin and proud, wearing gaudy colorful clothing and wears a face of fresh bloody gashes. Barking at a woman, an elf, he swipes up a bottle of glowing red drink, guzzling it in two swallows.

The lacerations, only four and not that deep, seal shut as if his cells are in overdrive.

I think of the dead man's grey silt skin and his concave wound.

I move to the edge of camp to sit in the snow until I forget I have legs.

Later, Favrun tries to offer food. It is horrid. I eat it, regardless. Vomit follows shortly and I wonder if it is because it is poison. Because it is a part of a dream. Because… Biologically, it would be that I am not dispositioned to this food or water, yet.

Log - Hypothesis
Dreamt within a dream - black ocean again.

Floating face up, a celestial body looms.

The food doesn't sit right.

Massive black dog - 'Mah-Bar-Ee' they call it.

That thing loves biscuits. Named him McMeaty.

Being awake is more and more the reality.

Too aware for it to be otherwise.

Which means there was a deposit. Somehow.

I sleep in a carriage with Favrun, Araina, and Eshne. Araina and Eshne now look at me with pity and care when it was wariness yesterday. Favrun is hard and strong and motherly, a blessing in this midst of these three days of unraveling.

My dreams within dreams continue the trend of the calm black ocean and glowing Earth above. It is as if it is one constant dream, interspersed with the normal oddities of subconsciousness. Unusual that I do not have nightmares here. They were constant before.

The camp moves - thousands of people by wonky carriages, by foot, by monstrous horse and bulky elk. I can barely keep water down.

More people die today as the caravan hobbles. Instead of an astrophysicist, perhaps my new calling is to be death’s midwife.

As if they had the audacity to further complicate my new world view, people pull fire from nothing. Controlling it as if it were magic to burn a load of corpses like kindling. And other fantastical things that bend the laws of physics in ways of wonderful improbability. There’s no way to break the second law of thermodynamics - they must be doing something, pulling that energy from somewhere.

We walk from sunrise to sunset. Those two moons caress a sense of madness within me. Do I accept this? That there are more people dying? That there’s… Magic? Elves? Sinking further into my parka, Varric and Mahanon cautiously join the campfire.

Varric looks on in the kind of sympathy a person needs in times of cosmological damnation. Mahanon wears a kind of anger, luminous yellow eyes glinting in the firelight. But I do not think it inherently at me. Maybe.

They talk amongst themselves after a length of silence.

There is a big, black lame creature, the kind of spawned by the coupling of a brick shithouse and a pitbull. It waddles slowly, sagging down with an ‘uff’ at my side. Black fur, coarse and oily, glistens in the warm light. The dog looks old, grey around its saggy, folded orange eyes. I feed it the biscuit that would have made me vomit anyway.

Communal McMeaty, a good name. The reason for it: after I’d had my fill of petting him, he rose and sought biscuits and scratches from another.
The polyamorous bliss of ignorance.

Log - Experiment

Black oceans are calming, at least.

Eerie, though.

Saw a woman bleeding; menstruation?

Mammalians? Breeding? Dear GOD.

Another layer of violence to worry about.

I feel afraid and at a loss.

Feel like something is wrong, but also feel… alright.

The rest? Beyond fucked. The point is I feel.

Another day, another lumbering caravan, sunup to sundown. I do not leave because I do not know where I would go. Melted water to clean off; earned odd looks. Even stranger looks when I brush my teeth. While this is all fucking horrible in the grandest of scales, I possess my faculties. And a sense of smell.

No burnt bodies, but there were three men, found torn apart… By something; didn’t get close, but there was a halo of red snow. At least on Earth they were blown away. Thedas seems versed in gore and carnage. Less efficient, but that's for the best, isn’t it?

To ignore it, and the rest, the past... I write; postulate; observe. Atmosphere similar, organic life that behaves much like I’d known. Mammalian. This is all the more disconcerting. While there is obvious dimorphism, these creatures are distinctly humanoid. Accidentally saw two men relieving themselves; an elf and a dwarf... Parts look about right for men which is really fucking confusing.

Another campfire, Varric, Mahanon and Cassandra join for proximity, their conversations to themselves. Mahanon gently, firmly, rests his hand on Cassandra’s knee in a fit of laughter. He doesn’t remove it.

Another biscuit tossed to Meaty. As Meaty leaves for commune, Solas joins, hips swaying in the distance, long legs muscular in disproportionate ways. Shirking off a worn green vest and resting an ornate walking stick at his feet, he takes space by my side.

The painful reach - he must do it for some purpose, no one is this sadis- Nevermind. I wonder if it’s magic. If he’s filling me with the fire that those people whipped up from nothing, and that’s perhaps the cause of pain. Once finished, he remains sitting, listening to Cassandra and Mahanon speak with the luxury of comprehension.

He knows that I watch him, eyes flickering to confirm once or twice, movements guarded. His lashes are dark and long and I wonder if his natural hair is the same. Soon he pulls back from the conversation and we fall into watching each other.

Elves have sloping brows and massive eyes - Solas, however, is different. Taller, broader, pointier. Enough to notice in comparison. His eyes are small, though his iris takes more space than his sclera.
to illude towards a larger size. Dark bags of fatigue, cheeks sallow, eyelids bruised. Shallow lines set in at the corner of his eyes and the edge of his lips. I do not know his age, but he is far older than I.

He looks at me now in a kind of calculating appraisal and so I do the same.

Despite wrinkles, hooked nose, and his shaved head, he is attractive in the forbidden way aliens ought to be.

Having seen an elf earlier, I now know they have the right parts. If he were to ask, I would likely say yes. It would be a good distraction from the mess of this place.

A question from Mahanon pulls him back into his fray.

Favrun joins next, a wooden stool in one hand, a comb of bone in the other. Her raspy voice is firm as she undoes my hair to brush it, scoffing with a caring swat when I attempt to refuse. She sits about a foot behind to brush it all. My head bobs from the force of her pulls, the pain a calming reassurance as the others fall into a world-wary conversation.

This is a good pain, a rhythm. A test. I can feel it, and much more. I still have my phone and many other things in my pack; there are ways to explore.

Favrun finishes by braiding it tightly back up, my hair now smelling of some herb that could be vanilla and sage united. Varric laughs says the word “Princess.” Cassandra, on the other side of Mahanon, chides him.

Solas and Mahanon watch with expressions unreadable as I butcher the words “Thank you, Favrun,” in a way that I hope sounds grateful.

“Of course, Andra,” she replies, standing to leave towards her carriage. I follow.

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**Log - Conclusion**

Amal, if only you were here to slap me.

Slap some good ol' sense.

**THIS IS A LOT TO UNDERSTAND.**

Their language, can barely get a grasp of it.

If alive, it is possible to then die.

Must treat it with such. Even if that was the plan before.

Question everything and learn enough to make my own judgements.

Assume nothing.

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Early morning, before the lumbering caravan moves, two moons begin to hide from view, sky a brilliant pink.

Journaling all of this has helped streamline my thoughts. It… is likely. First, I outlay the elements as I know them, start documenting the locations of stars, writing the words I know which are "Hello," "Thank you," "Please," "Yes," and "No," “Elf, dwarf, qunari, and human.” Solas glides in, nearly
silent, in a manner that indicates he may have been watching for some time longer. He sits as I pause in the midst of my writing. He wears a frown, biscuit in hand. Feeding Meaty was not my prerogative, apparently. When Solas says my name, biscuit held out in warning, I take it without further coaxing. Elven glares unnerving.

There were many elves.

Humans and elves seemed to be the same in number. Tensions high as a result - a feud? Racial dynamics?

Before here, before Thedas, I hadn't restocked on coffee. All that remains is enough for one thermos. This morning as good as any. Solas stays, consuming a starchy biscuit in solidarity. He chews politely, with a closed mouth - the only time I see those sharp teeth is when he tears a bite. He is someone who is always watching, always thinking. I can appreciate that. His distant gaze probes the hot coals for any answer, though I’m unsure what he finds.

As a pot melts snow into a purifying boil, I fall back into observations... Even if this is the stream of my consciousness before death, I will move as I can. Even if I do not understand, even if this hurts. Even if...

A quick shake of the head to bring back the present, I place the journal down.

"May I?" Solas asks. I twist to look at him as I stand on my knees - his long fingered hand hovers just above my journal, his eyes wary yet expectant.

I nod and turn back to the pot of boiling water.

Once the water steams above the fire, a fire made by the combustion of nothing but oxygen and a kind of telekinetic connection, I pour it over the last of the coffee I shall drink for an indeterminate amount of time.

Retaking seat next to Solas, he flips through the writing - ideas, concepts, day dreams, doodles, approaches to string theory, attempts at philosophical debunking of multiverse... I pause his perusal to reach over, dog earring that specific page. He moves through intentionally ugly drawings and I see him smirk for the first time. He repeatedly glances over the beginnings of rudimentary research of quantum effects of super-strong magnetic fields surrounding blackholes and neutron stars. His fingers brush over some of the long, complicated proofs and he sighs, shoulders sagging.

He touches the wound again. Painful, I don't pretend it isn't anymore. Not the wound, but what he does.

"Eat," he motions to the biscuit. There had been hope that he'd forgotten.

Nibbling the first few bites as he continues through his, I say "Human, elf, qunari, dwarf...?" cringing at the sound of butchered words. Solas looks over, brow risen, cheek puffed out mid chew. I'd have laughed at such a goofy face before all this.

Pointing to a man yawning, hand scratching his belly as he doubles back in a stretch "Human."

Pointing to Solas, "Elf."

Pointing to a horned person who jumps out of a wooden carriage, the frosted ground shaking under their booted feet. "Qunari,"

Pointing to a squat, stocky woman, hair dark and face beautiful, as she sponge bathes an injured man
"And?" I ask in English, both hands rising in a shrug. There were four sentient species so far, there might be five or six or eleven.

It's possible that I've grown three extra heads by the look I'm given. Several moments more pass as he battles with various internal dialogue before, in a quiet tone, he says "Spirit."

Surveying the surrounding people, I see no one different, nothing that would indicate a fifth species. "Spirit?" I gesture to the lot of them with a brief wave of my hand.

Shaking his freshly shaven head, he turns to the waking caravans. After perusal of those that were awake, he pauses on a pale, thin man - one who wears a hat that looks like the spawn of a hubcap and an umbrella. He looks definitively human but Solas extends the gentle sweep of a palm, saying "Spirit,"

I shrug, not possessing the vocabulary dig, even though there isn't much physical difference between this supposed spirit and a human. This has incentivized further thought for Solas, however. His eyes flicker down and to the right, indicating possible fabrication or memory access. As he lifts his gaze, inordinate confusion about him, he asks in an uncharacteristic whisper. "Andromeda, Spirit?"

"...Human." I think I still am.

Solas does not seem thoroughly convinced.

Chapter End Notes

Did you catch that her logs were titled with the stages of the scientific method?

Almost a complete rewrite! Trying to get Andromeda to a way I want her. Kept a lot of the concepts from the first attempt, added more, and kept Andromeda's narration sort of clipped to try to showcase her difficult time accepting what's happening, but slowly.

Also! Holy cow - thank you for almost 50 kudos in the first week! You all make my heart soar!
Log - Skyhold Day 2; Thedas Day 11

Skyhold. A literal castle.

Placed in a boarding room with other women, all young.

Magic casters, possibly. Guarded - my bed closest to door.


Slick, viscous rain has poured for the past day and a half. Setup into what seems to be a new living situation is difficult. Some of the people are weak from malnutrition, so I assist Favrun near the medic tents where a makeshift medical station is erected. The smaller people, the elves, are wary of me at first. I do what I can to seem non-threatening and as supportive as possible.

Skyhold, a massive castle the size of a campus complete with dormitories, education centers, and training grounds.

As the evening ushers in more storms, there is a girl who falls from the top of the castle’s six hundred stairs. A bend of the ankle against slick stone. No one else registers this fateful slip. An instinctual response rapid fires, one I wish I’d had before. She plummets head first, her arms flailing. Few would survive this fall.

She will.

Running forward with only one idea at hand. The girl is of a slim build, allowing my mass to dominate hers. I’d rather her fall and break both of our bones than render one dead.

Adrenaline infused seconds slow into minutes as I counter my weight against her ninety pounds when wet. Fingers linking into her skirt waist, my other hand gripping her upper arm. Swooping around with a calculated, centrifugal swing, she's vaulted back upwards. A second volley to cancel out the momentum of her fall by applying directional force. How I succeed in this, I do not know.

Each strand of muscle screams in protest against such use. A dull thumping of the heart my tempo.

The second time I catch her, she flounces heavily into my arms, safe and alive. It is now she begins to cry. Large eyes bloodshot from overwork and dark hair tied hastily into a short pony.

How she, or I, stand here in the rain without injury is, in short, incredible.

Hands shaking, I place her down and move away, head lowered to ignore the stares of the surrounding bustle. Their whispers more alarming than the series of blades harnessed at every passerby’s waist.

Varric and Solas, visual contrasts to one another, intercept.
“Quick work!” Varric’s rasp calls out.

They stand before the doorway of a pub. Above the entrance, installed only this morning hangs a painting of a woman with long blonde hair; in her arms is a figure, enrobbed, hand painted with a green light.

“Andraste,” they call her. The pub named “Herald’s Rest”

The two are turned slightly in the direction where the girl would have fallen - a group crowding her, now providing consul.

There is an invisible glass that shields the two men from the rain. Freezing globules of rain cling to my hair, skin, and clothing and I realize I am jealous of these mages - how convenient magic is in this place.

“A lot stronger, and faster, than you look. For a Princess,” Varric laughs, jovial in a way to mask concern. Solas dips his head, his upper body leaning against a metal staff.

“Most thankfully, a magnanimous one,” While I expect Solas to speak in a paced harmony, this is deliberately spoken. I cannot tell, but I think I am meant to feel it is said in distrust, especially with the odd, opposite tilt of his head. Having seen the frustrated pinch of his brow when he looks upon the black puncture, Solas’ implacability is ironically the easiest to read.

With a dip of my own head in dismissal, the journey for Favrun continues.

“Still no idea where she’s from?” Varric’s voice fades as the distance grows.

“No, Master Tethras,” Solas says, “While answers may exist within the Fade, they have not yet revealed themselves,”

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**Log - Skyhold Day 9; Thedas Day 18**

Day to day - assist Favrun first with apothecary. Then assist with cooking in kitchens.

Two weeks, arduous work.

Despite working, there is little conversation.

Handle of Trade Speak still horrible.

Tremendous amounts of these ‘poultices’ that expedite healing.

Snuck away with five or so to deposit them next to those in cots.

Have lost too much weight; clothes do not fit any longer.

Hunting today - first time leaving Skyhold since arrival.

Idrilla: don't know her well, seems nice. Eshne’s daughter.

At this point, it is important to track belongings as they have been gone through twice.

They must not know what pistols are.

**INVENTORY**
1. 600 page graph journal & 12 pens (183 pages used)
2. Headphones (Bluetooth)
3. Cell phone (iphone)
4. Solar-powered charger (iphone & universal adapter)
5. Pack of 6 bic lighters, and ferro rod & stone
6. Water canteen & water purification tablets (10 litres)
7. Rations (dried apricots, dried almonds, jerky, 2 mre’s)
8. **Coffee**
9. Crystal Head Vodka (half full)
10. Mylar blanket (Still have to clean Mahanon’s blood off)
11. Toothbrush & Toothpaste
12. Crystal Deodorant
13. Mascara & lipgloss
14. 2 oil perfumes
15. Soap (1.5 almond bars)
16. Photo album (40 photos)
17. Polaroid camera with 30 films
18. Led flashlight (rechargeable)
19. Collapsible rod, fishing line, and 6 lures
20. Catch-All Net
21. Hatchet
22. Small cast iron pot & wooden spoon
23. Metal mess kit
24. Thermos (coffee/tea press)
25. Spices (salt, pepper, garlic)
26. Tent tarp & rope
27. Sleeping bag (chill rating to 0°F)
28. 20m of STATIC polyester rope
29. Compass (isn’t working, magnetization WEIRD.)
30. Maps of the US & World
31. Uniden submersible talkies (50 miles) with 1 set spare batteries
32. Bowie knife & sharpening stone
33. Bear Mace
34. Remington 1911 (8 round chamber, .45cal ammo w/ 220 bullets)
35. Passport (useless currently)
37. Books
   1. Through the Looking Glass - Carroll
   2. Sidelights on Relativity - Einstein
   3. The Unbearable Lightness of Being - Kundera
   4. Nausea - Sarte (somewhere deep within this book is a cruel joke)
   5. Dune - Herbert (perhaps my reading choices are the cruel joke)

The concept of Eternal Returns* blares.

If I am meant... If this... No. While the simplest answers are desired, this situation does not fit 'simplistic'.

There has never been a moment where I was frightened to open a novel.

But, Life has changed. The significant weight of those words hidden between soft covers are not unlike my photos of the Grand Canyon or Griffith Observatory. Or the portraits I still cannot look at without panicking.

But they do carry a significantly different tone.

These five books are untouchable as they are the last known thoughts of a world that isn’t Thedas.

So, I fall into line to assist Favrun in whatever way possible. While some regard this exchange as odd, it occupies my time and is beneficial for both parties. My hands a viable assistant willing to be instructed. Her copper hair and oddly spaced square features a protective distraction. I know which leaves are edible and which leaves are poisonous. Which berries to pick and which berries to not.

“Andra!” I push off the lump of mattress at her call, pausing at the others. Out of the twelve straw beds, only I, along with two sleeping women at the opposite end, remain. Mine is closest in line with the door. This arrangement is likely intentional as guards, dressed in full plate, come in to check every other hour. Regardless if the room is occupied or not.

Why I, or any of these other women seem of specific interest, I remain unsure. The most dangerous thing about me is the Remington and the two hundred and twenty .45 caliber rounds. How it has not yet been confiscated... Again, I remain unsure.
Favrun's voice calls again and I pull my groggy thoughts together to yank open the door.

Deep amber eyes meet mine before committing to a full sweep, scanning the perimeter. In seconds, she’s pushes past, determination written firmly, as always, and arms filled with various shades of dark clothing. Such intensity endearing at her height of five foot zero.

She speaks in a tone of what I believe to be admonishment. Something of sleep... and what I think is morning. Her dress, comprised of umber leather and yellow fabrics, sways about her ankles. These colors support her golden skin and warmth.

I assume any scolding she has is that I’ve only just risen. With no alarms and no clocks, it is difficult to adjust. Some mornings I wake, sky still dark and other mornings are instead afternoons. Often as I lay, recalling in great detail, the glowing sphere or the ripples on black waves.

The more I dream, the more the more I grow sure there’s little chance of waking up.

“Good morning” I follow Favrun's bee-line, extending my arms to assist only to be swat away with a questionably free hand. She drops the stack with an unceremonious flop onto the straw mattress, swiftly peeling a layer from the top and whipping it out in one fluid motion. In seconds, she’s holds a woad blue tunic chest high. Blinking, I watch Favrun as she tilts her head, her eyes narrowing in scrutinization.

“Favrun?” I question, gazing at the pile of blue and black fabric.

“Andra, clothes,” she gestures, speaking two words slowly to my current state of dress before taking the slack fabric around my midsection between her thumb and forefinger to wiggle it.

“Clothes” I repeat. She nods, her sharp eyes critical of my current state of dress. My jeans and turtleneck are now embarrassingly baggy when snug before.

In the two months since the mountain, I’ve lost weight, enough so that I shock even myself in reflections. Reasons? The food still doesn’t sit well, and it is rare to be sitting for longer than ten minutes. I’d been active before, and ate relatively well, however… Nutrition is of my least concern. Still, unsurprisingly, I am often the roundest in the vicinity. Being thick isn’t met with derision, and instead a classist contempt. Little victories.

“Thank you,” is all I can deliver as I lift a pair of stitched black leather. There’s a certain appreciation that my taste for carbon tones had been considered. As I am about to pull another tunic, a slate grey, the buttons on my jeans pop open.

In Favrun’s haste, she has begun to undo my pants.

“Please, no,” in piecing together the language, I take hold of Favrun's smaller hands. She, in turn, gives me a tried look. One thin red brow rises as she speaks at a pace I can’t follow while she wiggles the bottom hem of my shirt again. I shake my head - while although she may be the only person I place even a sense of remote trust, nudity is something I share only in sexual conquest. A sad marking of America’s taboo relations with sex despite hyper-sexuality. An unfortunate one I cannot shake.

Favrun sighs before snagging a pressed set of what is likely undergarments. They’re a pale linen, clips on each to hold them in place. She whips each separately to unfold them, stuffs them in hand, then turns volte-face towards the wall. A two-fingered-two-snap her method of expediting the process.

The two remaining women, thankfully, remain slumbering. With this little peace, I quickly shed my
clothing and undergarments in exchange for the new. The bra band is a bit difficult to figure out, yet I manage. This fabric is stiff and snug, holding tight where it should, even for moderately sized breasts.

I waste no time in snagging the blue tunic, yanking it on over my head and hair. The sleeves cinch at the forearms and the bottom hem of ruffles end just at the hips.

“Andra,” Favrun sighs in exasperation, turning back around with her arms over her chest. Any annoyance that she had before melts as she homes in on the tunic, seemingly content.

“Araina’s Clothes.” Favrun dictates slowly before falling into her natural pace of Trade. She runs her lithe, lined hands over my shoulders. There is a brief moment in which her path stills over the wound. Then, that too, is smoothed over.

“Thank you, Araina.” I say as Favrun lifts a pair of leggings. The black leather has a satin quality to it - oiled, new, and soft. Araina’s duties had shifted to that of a seamstress and Eshne moved to working inside the Skyhold’s main compound. I had not yet been allowed in the West wing, so Eshne’s new duties are yet a mystery.

“Sovereigns?” I ask as I bend to stuff my legs into the pleasantly fragrant leather, wondering how I would afford such nice clothing when I had no method of paying for them.

“It’s a gift, Andra. With all the work you do, it’s the least we can do. Humans might not take care of their own, but I won’t shirk kindness,” Once upright, I hop twice to pull the trim leggings up, earning a bit of laughter.

This continues until I am tightly wrapped in a kind of underbust bustier, Favrun having laced it so tightly I’d likely never escape it.

Her smile falls as she reaches out; her fingertips trail above my collar and over the puncture again. Often, I forget it is there. Unhealing, devoid of pain. After the uncomfortable first week with Solas the only one to inspect the wound, others had soon been tasked with doing so in his absence. But less often. Various medics dressed in robes inspect it for a few minutes, acknowledge that it has not changed, and then turn back to the many injured and dying that were littered in the tents at the outskirts of the fortress.

Distance had been a relief upon Solas' departure. A presence that was ever looming and looking in ways I hadn't realized he had. He, along with Mahanon, Cassandra, and several strangers, left the fortress shortly after arriving. The day after that girl fell. They haven’t returned since. Only a few of Mahanon’s inner circle remain in Skyhold… A one-eyed Qunari named Iron Bull, a flamboyant, mustachioed man named Dorian, the kind and mischievous Varric...

And Cole. Cole remains.

Even now, Cole regards me with a kind of feared contempt. I'd spent time enough wondering why, and still wonder, but know well enough to give him a wide berth.

Favrun extends a pair of dark wool stockings and a thick, fat fruit from her dress pockets. Shoving the mealy fruit between my teeth to slip on the socks, black boots following. Favrun's hands sink into my hair as I do so, her fingers tying it into a thick, efficient plait just as quickly as she had laced my corset. This process, this touch, is comforting. As the first time she'd braided my hair, and the times after, there is pain to each wrap. A grounding pain. Touch had never been a communication tactic I had been good with, but utilized it when needed. Especially now.
And so, I cherish this silent moment between Favrun and I.

Across the hall is an open window with a clear view of battlements that lead out front of the keep. Several people dot along it... Squinting to make out the person- the feathered cowl, Cullen. Mahanon’s warlord or whatever the feathers and brooding look were meant to read.

Aside from Mahanon’s inner circle, there are the three admins of Skyhold. There is Leiliana and Cullen, who I first met on the mountain and then another I met shortly after, a beautiful and lavishly dressed woman named Josephine Montiliyet. These three seem to be the control and power over this current establishment, Mahanon the active figurehead.

No matter what I was doing, at least one pair of eyes, belonging to either the three admins or the three inner circle members, were set to a scale of Sauron.

Unnerving at first, but after almost a month of being stared at and not spoken to, one can grow accustomed. I only have myself to blame for that.

Outside of observing their night sky, creating mediocre charts without a compass, and a sun-dial out of uneven parchment, I do my best to keep my head low by assisting Favrun. Yet, even helping her, Araina, or Eshne seemed to warrant stares and whispers.

Each day had consisted of this, helping the elven mothers or other servants. It seemed safe.

Today, however, is different. A different approach. Directives from the red headed woman named Leiliana.

Eshne’s daughter, Idrilla, and I are to travel outside the fortress; my first time outside the hold since arriving. In the haze of the morning and in receiving Araina’s gift of clothes, it had slipped my mind. The beautiful weather just beyond the window reinvigorates the memory.

“Idrilla?” I say the name through another bite just as the braid is completed. The plait brushes against my back and in turning towards her, Favrun nods in confirmation. Taking one step back, her index finger rests on her chin as she observes her handiwork. I smirk and pose, hips tilted and arms flexing, held briefer than the span of a second, fruit still stuck in my mouth. She rolls her eyes, clapping her hands once in approval. It is... the first moment I've felt... okay. In months. Not as before, but okay.

She speaks at her natural pace as she moves towards the exit and rests her shoulders against the massive door frame, waiting but not in impatience.

Stooping over the bed, I organize and fold the remaining clothes haphazardly, quickly hiding the rest by covering it with the thin blanket. Next is my pack. Only a few of my belongings inside it, the more personal and fragile hidden in a crate underneath the bed. Swinging one strap over my shoulder, rusty parka safely in the other arm. With my hands full, Favrun speaks and pushes herself upright as she moves into the hallway. Unable to follow her words, I instead follow her while enjoying the sensation of snuggly fit clothes again.

A typical morning would have been spent out at the makeshift apothecary stall by the medic tents, but this morning we walk outside and down the several (hundred) tiers of granite steps. My heels snap against the stone, Favrun’s slippers soft and made of leather. Faint clouds smatter the light blue sky, the air chilly but not cold. The sun sits about mid-morning as it spreads a comfortable balm. I close my eyes at the warmth at an inopportune time and nearly stumble off the last stair. The only way to catch myself is by making an awkward over-step. An immediate and tight laugh fails to hide my embarrassment as Favrun shakes her head while chuckling, starting in the direction of the main entry.
In the distance, I see Idrilla resting amongst some kegs at the front gate. She lazily pets McMeaty who rests at her feet. Idrilla is nearly identical to her mother: just two inches shorter than I. Fit, black cropped hair, and rich chestnut skin. Such short hair displays her pointed ears proudly - something endearing about all elves, especially when they flicker and twitch.

Idrilla takes notice of us far before we reach her; she lifts her head, giving a smile of yellowed yet charming teeth. Once closer, she stands to greet, and I take in that she’s ready to depart: her well-worn leather pack, carved bow, and blunt knives already attached to her person with various straps. Idrilla regarded me with a certain amount wariness at first, as her mother had. However, over the past week she warmed to companionable meal times with the other elven mothers.

“Hello, Idrilla,” I nod to her and she responds in kind.

“Hello, McMeaty,” greeting the dog next, I throw my parka over my shoulder to give his face, jowls, and neck a good long scratch as Idrilla and Favrun converse.

With their rapid exchange of words, there is no possibility of following along. Once McMeaty seems content, slumping back down, I take in the surrounding area. I count how many guards and medics tend to wounded. How many barrels, how many horses, how tall the walls are. How many elves, many, humans, many, dwarves, few, quanari, fewer.

A sharp, shocking whistle pierces the air. Each of us turn to view the culprit. To pleasant surprise, swaggers Varric, from the direction of what looked to be sellers and merchants, a confident smirk on his square jaw. He saunters over with a small crossbow, not the one he typically carries, in his hands while he exchanges words with Favrun. I study his features as he speaks, the lines that deepen in his cheeks when he smiles, the handsome squareness of his face, and the glitter that’s always twinkling just behind his eyes. Just as I’m about to decide their color, the glittering things meet mine. While he is critical as the others, there is less malcontent here.

Favrun looks to me, her hand on the small of my back now as she pushes me forward.

“For you, Princess,” Varric bows, theatrically even for his height, as he extends the crossbow made of warm, white wood and lustering metal. I take the gesture that this is for me.

“Sovereigns?” I try, but stop as he lifts a thick brow in question. Favrun's sharp fingers rap my shoulder in a scold.

“Gift,” her tone is firm as Varric chuckles while up-righting himself. Two steps more and he’s placing the crossbow in my hands. I’ve never shot one before, only pistols and rifles. It feels lighter than the expectation.

I’m unsure of what to say, as I turn it over in my hands - The crossbows I’ve known and seen were mechanically powerful and delicately engineered to down bears and elk. This one was small and made of wood and not metal, but the mechanism on it was astoundingly fine. A wood much like a kind of white pine, small engravings of leaves and other fineries along the side. It is too ornate a gift.

I let the crossbow rest in one hand as I stoop over, unsure of how to show my gratitude beyond this, and wrap his thick shoulder in a one-armed hug. He stiffens and I release him after one squeeze.

“Thank you, Varric,” I hope my sincerity is apparent. He looks away, chuckling with one hand on his hip.

I turn and do the same to Favrun. Idrilla seems good company, but I will miss her even if we’re only gone until sundown. Her small body stiffens, like Varric’s, but she quickly relaxes and wraps her
thin arms around my shoulders.

"Thank you, Favrun," I say, turning from her and moving towards Idrilla who’s already on the opposite side of the gates.

"Good luck on your first hunt," Varric calls as Idrilla and I walk off the main path. "Don't give the Spymaster a reason to off you,"

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**Log - Skyhold 24; Thedas Day 33**

It's been a month.

An entire month.

Even if a way home is discovered, what remains?

What's left?

What could be left...?

Hunting has become something to look forward to each day, but Idrilla spends little time in teaching Trade. The animals we hunt are much like foxes and hares... But... off. Their structure is different, bigger. Broader. Far more muscle than I'd ever known a rabbit to produce.

Selling the meat and the fur produce great returns - at least... I think; their currency is gold coins. Soft enough for teeth... Likely pure. Sovereigns, they call them. The first earnings spent on various items - a set of sharpened knives, a few other things, and sweets from a traveling merchant. Hardened cakes, not unlike petit-fours. Favrun had finished hers quickly. The flavor kept me from enjoying mine; a little too much like licorice and cream cheese. I couldn't help but laugh at how horrible it tasted.

Favrun sits across the two person table within the dorm style room. We are the only occupants; the other women often eating within the hold or within the tavern.

Favrun's fingers grip the photo album and as the plastic cover creaks upon opening. She had seemed interested in my things, wanted to look through them. A certain anxiety builds. Reining it as best as possible, it still mashes through an invisible ceiling. Anxiety mounting. I nod in agreement despite knowing that the polaroids inside would undo the first mildly pleasant day I've had since waking here.

As she peruses the first page of snapshots, I rise to collect the remnants of our dinner. To avoid their smiles and the daggers that are their soft gazes, I walk my way across the grounds to deposit the dishes in the kitchen. Panic, terror, longing... Amalthea... Atlas... Archer. Madalina... Godwin, even. Gone... It has been weeks... And even if Earth was to suddenly return to me, they would not.

I bide my time when dropping off the dishes in the kitchens. Say goodnight to Borsin, a friendly dwarf, and slow each step on the grounds. Once returning, the room still empty save for Favrun, the album is closed and placed on my side of the table. Expression has sunk, her eyes are wide and cast against the wall for a few moments more before setting upon me. Motioning to my journal and pen, she picks it up and finds the earliest empty page.

She draws herself as best as she can. A stick figure in a dress with points for ears and a triangle skirt. "Favrun," she says as she draws a connecting line to a stick figure much larger. She gives this one rounded ears. "Thandan," she says next. In the midst of this connecting line, she draws another
downwards. This stick figure is smaller with half-way pointed ears and long hair. "Rhyea." This stick figure is named.

"Die?" My throat is thick around Trade, especially this word.

"Yes. During The Fifth Blight," she nods, a pain long since healed physically, but still with the memory. "It is painful to watch your loved ones taken from you. Nothing but time heals that wound, Andra."

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**Log - Skyhold Day 38; Thedas Day 47**

Hunting is nostalgic in different ways.

Avoiding thoughts on the rest.

Don't think that's good - the avoiding the rest.

Should start looking at metals to make batteries.

Gravitationally powered lights. A working compass.

But... Not yet. Not yet. Not yet.

The hunts have been very successful, earning gold coins.

Idrilla doesn't speak much, problematic for learning Trade.

Proficiency with the crossbow is improving, however.

Should thank Solas for the eyesight eventually.

Today is when we leave Skyhold for longer than a day.

Nervous. Bringing pistol, just in case.

Haven't forgotten the red halo.

The routine has become one of hunting with Idrilla or tearing leaves for Favrun. A far cry from grading papers of a lazy, yet tenured, faculty and assisting classes of ninety or more students in the thick center of Chicago. It is incredibly useful in learning the vastness of flora, and fauna outside of Skyhold. Each hunting trip was always within reach, within ten or so miles, enough to make the trek and back. For every five days, we’d rest at the keep for two, repeating the process.

Idrilla did her best to educate their methods for hunting. Along with of my own memories of deer season and the range, our returns every night are successful. Perhaps more than Idrilla expected them to be. The first chance at a bit of pride in this place.

As I continue to earn currency, the coins are stored safely underneath that lumpy straw mattress. Along with the rest of my belongings. Still too afraid to open any of the books. Journaling works just fine.

The exploration and income wasn’t the only positive in these activities. The interaction with someone closer to my own age and deliverance from the watchful eyes of Skyhold, had done wonders for the mood. I’d also been able to learn quite a lot about their night sky, at least for navigation’s sake. In the
search for metal, and to make a rudimentary compass, the search for magnetic metal still ongoing.

Mahanon still hasn’t returned with his team - they’d been gone for nearly two months now. Without Solas or Mahanon, Skyhold seems simpler. Hunt or weed during the day, sleep during the night. Routine that can be trusted.

Save that two days ago, Idrilla had mentioned we would be leaving overnight.

Not routine, not at all boring, and not just one day, but a course of several. Idrilla had shown on maps where exactly we were traveling - first a place called the Hinterlands and then to a forest, Arbor something. Or at least the edge of a forest to meet someone, or several someones. We’d been tasked with bringing several packs of dried flowers. A specific breed I hadn’t seen anywhere in the wanderings around the fortress, nor in the walking towards our destination.

I had packed light but responsibly: the last MRE and several sachets of dried fruit, the sleeping bag, the ferro rod, the LED flashlight fully charged, the Remington and sixty rounds, linen for cleaning and bandages, rope, the water canteen, a map of Thedas, an extra pair of undergarments, a pair of knives, and the white wood crossbow with bolts. I had purchased the knives a week ago with the earnings from hunting. In addition to all of that, Favrun gave both Idrilla and I two of glowing red concoctions in small blown-glass bottles. I understand I’m only to drink it when seriously injured. Something to be avoided at all costs.

When life before constituted of late nights surrounded by massive computers or a quiet forest or telescopes or the bustle of a massive city - I can say, without reservation, that wearing a leather bustier, daggers at my waist, and a crossbow at my back is a surreal concept.

Favrun, Eshne, and McMeaty see us off early, just as their two moons clip behind the mountains.

The first two days, we camp late and rise early. Rough, yet rewarding. Such simple goals make this way of living preferable to the last few months experienced.

Now while under the stars and not sleeping in Skyhold, I realize I am constantly hungry... Or that my Hunger has grown. It no longer rests idle at the back of my mind. Instead, it’s now an ever-present mild discomfort. After taken fill on berries and jerky, I wonder if this is even appetite at all. It is easier to focus on the scenery.

Much like the hunting we’ve done for weeks, Idrilla teaches me the names of things as we walk. When not doing that, we move in companionable silence.

Now, on the third day as we draw near our destination, there is a dramatic shift in mood.

For the last few hours we have been walking an ascent of a rolling hill, littered with sparse pine-but-not-quite. The sky was clean an hour ago, but as Idrilla and I look up from my practice of colors, a series of sinister black smoke tendrils bleed into the sky. I feel the panic start within Idrilla before she shows it. Immediately, our conversation halts and our pace heightens to a light jog. I am unsure of what this means, but as the nervousness begins to pour from Idrilla, I don it, too.

Idrilla speaks hurried words as she bolts ahead, far faster than I, on her thinly muscled legs. As she reaches the pinnacle of the hill, she lets out a sharp cry and flies, out of my sight, straight into a long-legged sprint.

It’s only seconds later before I reach the height of the hill, scanning for what she had seen. Down, into the valley, a vast and thick forest blends in with the rolling hills. Likely the forest on the map. About half a mile to another mile inwards of the dense forestry looks to be the source of the smoke -
several large fires peak from under the canopies. Idrilla is like lightning, already quite a distance ahead, and I have no choice but to grip my pack and start after her.

As we near the tree line, echoes of faint screams trickle through - my legs suddenly feel like stone; slow until I’m barely moving. There are voices, many, calling out in fear and in pain. Fire can’t be the only cause of such an outcry, such an emotion that pulled and pushed my insides as it is now. Chest falling and rising rapidly, heart rate out of control. Air is stuck in my throat - I don’t want to see who’s causing this. I want to practice colors and hunt for birds.

I should have expected this. There has to be something that keeps those medical tents full. Something that keeps the bodies on the sides of the dirt roads. Something that caused that Red Halo... And the Concave Halo.

Idrilla plunges into the tree line without hesitation. Unable to call out, my own voice hidden somewhere. Idrilla’s fear fuels the Hunger that grows alongside. Closing my eyes, faces float in, potential and possible owners to the voices that continued to scream. I shake my head fast, trying to rid of what threatens to overfill it. Moments ago we had been pointing out things that were green. Not running blindly into a screaming forest.

Before I even solidify the thought, I’m tearing off the clunky backpack and digging to the bottom to grab the Remington and two already loaded clips. Loading one, I stick the other in the hem of my belt before pulling on my backpack to run again, entering the forest as Idrilla had.

If I must, I will shoot first this time.

I will shoot first.

The screams are loud, even a half mile away - the silence of the forest magnifies their intensity. Following the broken twigs and torn leaves that Idrilla burst through in her haste makes an easier path.

The hunger is painful now - I use that pain to push towards a clearing ahead.

Just in time to hear Idrilla’s screams join the rest.

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**Eternal Returns** - Eternal return (also known as eternal recurrence) is a theory that the universe and all existence and energy has been recurring, and will continue to recur, in a self-similar form an infinite number of times across infinite time or space. With the decline of antiquity and the spread of Christianity, the theory fell into disuse in the Western world, with the exception of Friedrich Nietzsche, who connected the thought to many of his other concepts, including amor fati. Eternal return is based on the philosophy of pre-determinism in that people are predestined to continue repeating the same events over and over again.

While the big bang theory in the framework of relativistic cosmology seems to be at odds with eternal return, there are now many different speculative big bang scenarios in quantum cosmology which actually imply eternal return - although based on other assumptions than Nietzsche's. So there are competing models and hypotheses with a temporal, spatial or spatio-temporal eternal return of everything in all variations as Nietzsche has envisaged.
Chapter Notes

**WARNING**: VIOLENCE AHEAD.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**Log - Thedas Day 50**

Amal, there are monsters.

Assumed, when I shouldn't have.

There were children. Two of them...

Can't sleep.

Why did we leave Skyhold?

Need to get back to Favrun.

Amal, I think something might be wrong with me.

I am unable to discern whether it is the fright of being lost in the wilderness or this morbid Hunger that spurs me forward.

A thick blanket of smoke and the ominous flicker of flame beckon just beyond the tree belt. Never keen on plunging thoughtlessly, a stop is pulled behind the cover a gargantuan gnarled tree. With a fist grip on the Remington, I survey the chaos.

Carriages, many of them, with red wind sails are the first things of register. Most are ablaze and have been smashed irreparably. Horned goat-elk are harnessed, trapped, to a few of the larger wagons. Of the few, they’re either hanging slain from the wagon’s tug shafts or bucking wildly in panic. People... No... *Bodies*, litter the ground. The earth beneath them is mud of carmine. Pointed ears. Elves, all of them. This the fifth register. None look dangerous. Sixth. There are so many children. Seventh. And elderly. Eighth. The only moving bodies are gargantuan and misshapen.

"Holy fuck," is barely audible and said in disbelief.

In the ash and lapping flames, hulking forms lumber, blooded weapons in their thick, scaled grips. Through the smoke stands Idrilla. In confrontation with one of the largest of them.

Bandits... Bears... These are what I think to expect, not the surrealistic image of a monstrous man bellowing in layered voices. Are... these what tore apart those people? Delivered the dying man's
concave wound? Resulting in the red halo?

Idrilla, with her bow in one hand, uses her other to fling a barrage of feathered arrows into the bloated monster. There’s a trailing gash at her thigh - injured already. This fresh wound adds to her snarling vision of rage, furious tears to complete an animalistic mask. In flashes a memory - bodies on the ground, far fewer. Only four... And an additional three. I shake it loose as Idrilla releases a shriek of grief and anger.

The world is the enemy in such a state. Whoever these people are on the ground, they must have been important to her.

I understand.

I try to count, flicking around for what remains upright - eight of these grotesqueries are circling, devoted attention on Idrilla. Three are heavily armored with what their corpulent bodies allow, plates strapped to slubbing arms and thick legs. It’s difficult to guess *what* they are - they’re humanoid, two arms, two legs, but their proportions are the stuff of medical nightmare. Skin a rainbow of pestilence.

In their most mutated parts spurs a scaly growth that glows scarlet, not unlike the potions that Favrun makes. It’s everywhere... an illness? A fungus? A malignant byproduct of hastened cellular regeneration gone awry? Radiation poison a real possibility - but it would, under no circumstance, cause such mutation.

The malformed man in front of Idrilla bellows, its face in shreds and eyes bulging. It swings a dripping, over-used axe. Spit and blood fly from its mouth in a continuous roar while overgrown shoulders hunch down in a charge. The ground shivers underneath its stump-like legs. Idrilla rolls away before she’s hacked in two, landing a choice arrow right in the side of its head once upright.

Yet, despite it landing, it doesn’t drop.

Instead, it thunders louder, smashing puffy armored fists into the blood-mud mixture. It spatters itself and the surrounding corpses in a spray of muck before whipping around to face her once more. Eyes are aglow the same hue as the stony growth. Another charge. I assume her agility to win out over its slower, clumsy form.

Assume nothing, always remember that.

As she leaps, the thing swings its ax.

Combining the sounds between a sopping thud and a dull crack, the monster’s axe carves a space to fit in Idrilla’s flesh. Her voice falters, at first a thick choke that rapidly blossoms into a shrill, piercing shriek. Her indescribable wail heightens as she slides off the ax, the remnant of their meeting an acute isosceles cut out. Sinking to the ground, she falls onto her back, free hand grasping at her opposite shoulder.

The remaining monster men are closing in, filtering in from between the burning carriages. There are four that are not armored, covered in leathers and cloth that have since become torn around their bodies. In making themselves visible targets, in crowding Idrilla, they remain unaware of my presence.

Good. It helps they do not look like people.

It will be easier.

I did not shoot first. But I will shoot.
That… Hunger... is so painful that a thought of running up to these creatures to rip a bite out flashes through me for an instant. Gone as quickly as it comes.

Shouldering off my pack, I dig again to pull the weathered ammo box out and stuff it into the pouch tied to my waist. I’ve already two full clips, but if arrows to the head don’t kill them, a .45 caliber might not either. Take no chances. Remember, assume nothing. Eight rounds to a magazine, sixteen rounds before I’d have to reload. Two bullets per. Down the leather wearers first.

Aiming before entering the clearing, I release the trigger. Sharp clarity ushers in a threatening sense of deja-vu. Keep it together.

The deafening crack of the muzzle is so loud that I gasp; the head of the first leather one erupts into bloody shards. Echoes of the shot slam against the trees, willowing out into the sky above. An unnatural sound for a place so quiet.

Seven left now. Aim for the next leather. The leathers wear no head protection and their bodies are swollen from disfigurement. Makes for easy targets. The second’s head splits open just like the first, a smattering of skull shards and brain hit the ground with sickening plops. An alarming wave of satisfaction washes me as they sink to their knees and flop forward underneath their dead weight. Too much is happening too quickly to wonder why arrows to the head won’t kill them, yet an explosive projectile does.

Third leather, like the first two, pops open like a squeezed melon. Fourth leather, is the same. I do not know how long it takes to headshot each, but it must still be within the first ten seconds of open fire as the armored ones remain stationary, turning only now to look in my direction. My face tightens and my chest throbs once I make eye contact with Idrilla's attacker.

They are aware of me now, the three that remain standing. My ears are ringing. I can’t tell if it’s because I’ve just blown four heads off, the fact that there’s at least thirty dead on the ground, or that the edges of my vision are blurring - green trees becoming red stone. The pitch heightens.

The closest armored monster isn’t sporting a helmet unlike the other two, its head far too warped. As if made of putty, the head is stretched in a glaringly unnatural way. Its jaws jut out and towards its shoulders. Three rounds in the first clip left. All three deposit into its gourd-like head.

Eight rounds, spent. Need to switch magazines. The two that remain are now galloping over, horrifyingly fast despite their size. Dropping the empty clip from the magazine well, I shove that into the hem of my pants in exchange for the loaded. Sliding it up and tapping, I pour three more rounds into the nearest.

A hinged door on the helmet exposes its shredded features. First bullet tears through its jaw and neck. Second, it stumbles after the removal of an eye. Third hits squarely where a nose should be but isn’t, it slumps.

Last one. The one that cut down Idrilla, pounds over. Fifteen feet away, too close. Axe held to the side. Arrows decorate its back as if it wears a jagged collar and one from its head protrudes as a quaint accessory- it wears a steepled open-faced hard hat. The red growth seems to have assimilated to it. Red shards curve from its cheekbones up its brow and onto the metal visor.

I bury four in its forehead. The fifth glances off the helmet as my aim falters, a quick thunk a confirmation it had landed in a tree or wagon. The hulking body, now sans face, loses control in a head-first dive. The ground underneath shakes and I stumble back two steps while it sags into stillness. A theatrical death.
The kind of silence that follows killing someone is suffocating.

The kind of stillness that follows killing eight monsters is maddening.

Reverberations of each gunshot still clamor through the air like infantile thunder cracks. I’ve been holding my breath and the first gasp is sharp, bright. My heart is pounding, head throbbing. The ringing lessens.

The Hunger is still here.

Worse.

The ricocheting sound fades and what remains are the sounds of panicked hooves, crackling fire, and Idrilla’s death rattling.

“Fuck,”

Shoving the muzzle into my leather pouch, safety off in case another blundered out. Doesn’t matter if I need to reload. My legs snap towards the fallen hunter. In passing the bodies of the fallen creatures, no second glance is spared either for time or my own sake.

“Idrilla!” comes higher than expected. She attempts to sit up but fails, crying out in messy agony. Her leather girdle and linen shirt are a soaking vermillion and her typically dark, rich skin is silt grey. Gagging is the response at the sight of her fresh injury, the scent of her exposed flesh cloying. The wound reveals her layers - fat and muscle and blood and bone. Life pumps from her as if she is a heavy pitcher. A torn artery, she'll be dead in minutes. I’ve seen bodily burns, twisted limbs, and gun wounds, but this is another level entirely.

My eyes sting, but my face feels too tight and hot to cry.

“Christ,” sounds more like a choke while kneeling in a plop next to Idrilla. Her face is waxy, expression bleak and eyes glassy. Wincing, she lifts the hand on her unwounded side to her lips.

“The healing poultice, Andromeda. Get one of the poultices,” her voice is hoarse but the information clicks. Her pack is still strapped to her back, causing her uncomfortable prone position and having slowed her minutes earlier. She must have had no idea these things were here, then, either. Especially to charge in so blind.

I check her waist pockets first - relieved to find them upon checking the second one. Would this thing be enough? Flesh wounds be damned.

Tearing off the wax stopper, my hands shiver from fading adrenaline. Steeling and focusing only on Idrilla, I lean over to cup the back of her neck. She cries out as her head is lifted, yet she opens her mouth despite the pain. Tilting the edge of the flask to her lips and she downs it one heavy gulp. How convenient to stay death with only a drink.

“More,” she croaks as I watch the wound begin to bubble and build upon itself. I am unable to tear away while blindly fishing for the second flask. Idrilla hisses as bone begins to reform and muscles begin to shift and seal. To add to the deluge of emotions coursing through, I’m amazed and still embittered at such a sight.

Repeating the process as the first, this time she takes two swallows. Her face twists into a deeply lined grimace; the gash fills faster with new, pink and red flesh. Groaning, she takes her free hand to grip her face as muscle forms.
Now, just the crackling of the burning carriages remains. Idrilla continues to lay on the ground and I by her side.

The weight of what has just taken place is crushing.

The Hunger hurts.

My mind drifts, unable to focus, as I explore the surroundings with danger no longer imminent. Take in new information, focus on something aside from the pain of this Want. It'll pass.

Now that the dead decorate the ground and these ugly humanoid creatures bleed out beside them… It is so alike in the weeks before Yellowstone. Before here. Breathing in the scent of copper and shit and dirt and stomach acid on the air. It is too personal, too cutting to see such magnified loss so soon. The purple eyed elf with the brown bled wound had been easy - distant. Detached.

They were odd, alien like people then. Now? This is too close.

“Andra,” Idrilla’s voice is less strained but not quite itself yet. “How did you kill them so quickly?” When I look to her still prone form, our gazes meet. Her eyes glassy from the pain, skin clammy and wet with sweat. Not having shown the pistol to anyone, it surprises even me that I had been permitted to keep it despite my belongings having been gone through several times.

Pulling it out gently and snapping on the safety, I support the muzzle and grip in my fingertips.

“No bow,” I say, frowning that I may have dropped Varric’s gift when running down the hill to get into the forest. I’ll have to find it. “Gun yes,” I use the words I know to convey the difference. I’m unsure if Idrilla understands or if she’s still too stunned to move beyond simple thoughts. She says nothing while staring at the black metal, eyes still far away.

“Idrilla hurt. More?” I make the drinking motion to offer the two concoctions still in my bag laying just beyond the clearing. The hack in her shoulder is still red. Layers of skin still missing. Beads of new blood begin to clot the remnants of the gash.

“No,” she grits her teeth as she rises to a sitting position. I shove the Remington away to aid her. “We look to see if anyone is alive. See to them,” she gestures with a limp hand to the bodies of the various elves that scatter the ground. “Nabbridi… I pray she was still in the Fallow Marsh.”

I crouch beside to offer support - she accepts and leans most of her weight into my shoulder as we stand. Hundreds, no, thousands of questions flood through me, but I lack the ability to formulate each succinctly.

“Elf hurt?” I gesture to the people on the ground.

Idrilla remains silent yet her expression does all the talking. Her neck pivots as she looks at the ruins of the massacre. Her jaw tenses as her nostrils flare, eyes widening in rage and sorrow. Tears well there. Her legs wobble, but she pushes towards one of the caravans.

“Just… Look for people. Alive.” She sighs as her wide eyes rove over literal devastation.

Just a few feet from where Idrilla laid is one of the murdered. Down on this stomach, face to the side, arms and legs spread. Given his clothing and the unused weapon beside him, he must have spent his last moments defending the rest.

A deliriousness sets in as I stare at his gaping mouth for a length of time likely inappropriate. Tattoos sprawl over his face, rather what remains of it.
The emptiness of the dead man almost has a sound.

Tearing my gaze away from him, I see Idrilla already looking through a carriage, calling out a name. "Nabridi!" Idrilla's call is desperate, but bitten back into control. Looking for someone, earning no response. She continues, strides are slow as she shudders in a deep breath as she passes one of the monster men, kicking at one of the red stones that had fallen from it.

While not aware of what the stony growth is, it’s luminescent enough to warrant at least picking one up for later inspection. Pulling out a strip of fabric from my pocket, I stoop over to pick up a chunk about the size of a mandarin, not risking touching it with skin. Tying the cloth off to pocket it safely, I continue.

Idrilla, in the distance, speaks with her back facing away. She kicks another red stone and I hear the worlds "Fenedis... Blighted lyrium..." I'd heard lyrium before - but what little I'd seen, it'd been blue.

Committing to a search feels beyond my capabilities but I move regardless.

The first carriage is blackened from still living flames. Nothing alive remains inside and I move to the next. An elk-goat dangles from the tug shaft, its belly slashed and spilling over the harness bands. The level of this carnage... Witnessing it so repeatedly feels like being a massive machine having six catastrophic malfunctions at once. Unable to process demise.

Tasting… Hunger.

Is this what prelude to Madness feels like? How many undulations before the true plummet into murmuring insanity?

There’s a cabin on the second carriage. As I draw near something shifts inside. Halting all movement, I try to gauge for anything: more movement, another sound. I’m no way combat-adept with a knife, so if another monster or anything, really, snaps out, a knife isn’t going to stop it. But it may make me feel better.

Unhooking the knife strapped to the outside of my thigh, I move to the entrance of the wagon. A shift of cloth drapes over the threshold, red, just like the stones, the blood, the sails. Lifting it, I cast the first cursory glance inside. Another shift, the floor giving way to a minor creak and a shocked gasp betrays them. With narrowed eyes to search for a form within the blocky shadows.

Then… I see it. Them.

Two small gems of green iridescence, like that of a cat. They’re attached to a small face hidden just behind several crates and tied bushels of grain. It moves again, and I make out its little body, thin arms, and narrow chest. It’s a child.

“Hello,” at a loss of what else to say, this seems appropriate. My voice strains at the thought of a child living through this. There are children scattered all over the ground, but to see one, hidden and alive…

“Idrilla!” I lean away from the carriage to call for her as she rolls a woman onto her back. With an urgency I’ve never seen on her, she whips around and upright in one slick motion. Bolting over in less time than it took me to turn yell for her, I note the injury on her leg completely healed. What remains of it is the smears of spent blood and ripped leggings.
Pointing through the door of the carriage as I lift the drop cloth, she slides to a stop and rests her hand on the door’s wooden frame. She peers inside as I had, gasping upon sight of the child. Words, ones of complete unfamiliarity, tumble from her as she reaches out with one open palms, wet blood marring her tunic. The speech she uses is soft and lulling, a series of rolling vowels and lisps. The first noise of response the child makes is a whimper, burying itself further into the cabin’s shadows.

Idrilla persists, voice softer yet. It isn’t long before her purring beckons the child out. It struggles for a moment, the silhouette of its tiny body gathering something hidden further behind the crates. The thing coos in its arms.

After a few hobbling steps, the light of day reveals little legs and bare feet. Then, platinum hair and tanned skin, its eyes are a shade of blue so deep I nearly mistake them for black. The child, now clearly a boy, wears only a thin poncho around its shoulders, the rest of his body naked. His face marred with fear and suspicion. I drift to the thing he is just barely able to hold. A baby, swaddled tight in leathers and beaded strings.

“Jesus Christ,” I breathe, truly at a loss. “Oh, fuck,” is the next closest to eloquence I can land. How did they survive?

The child speaks a few warbled words - it sounds far different from Trade and I’ve no context aside from his body language which reads a loud ‘WARY’. The only clear word he speaks is ‘shem’ while looking to me with eyes startlingly defiant despite his age. Idrilla tosses a momentary gaze my way and I shrug in my ignorance. Turning back to the boy, Idrilla croons and introduces both of us, along with several more of the rolling, smooth words.

As I attempt to focus on their pretty gibberish, a wave washes over the area. I’d have paid no concern to the sensation I hadn’t been fiercely aware of the dead air that hangs above this massacre. It comes again, strong enough to pull at a space beyond. The Hunger responds to it. Rationality begs to reload the gun, but sense is utterly paused.

Just beyond the clearing to what I assume would be North is a hill sloping upward. Dense and thick with forest. Shadows move in the distance, figures moving in a relaxing gait – unlike the lumbering monster men. I can hear them, yet they make no sound. With the noise and the smoke from what just took place, it’s unsurprising that it would capture attention of the surrounding area. Idrilla is preoccupied, picking both the boy and the baby up in her free arm.

I would have suggested that I carry them given my lack of injury. If my attention weren’t so raptly on those that approach. They have a smell and that Hunger boils to overwhelming heights. A whine, I think from me. A third wave suffocates and I sputter as my legs nearly threaten into a buckle and fold. Idrilla’s voice is distant despite being a mere two feet away.

In my periphery, she’s looking in the same direction as I am. Just in time to see one of the shadows make its slow gait into the clearing.

It is wholly unlike the monstrous men in the fact that it is simply monstrous, barely man.

Best described as offspring from Hell Raiser or Nightbreed. Its body is pulled long and taught with serrated hips and shoulders. A defining feature is its singular mouth that spreads from its maxilla to the middle of its chest with row after row of jagged shark-like teeth. Black eyes, too many to count, protrude from a smooth plate just above the teeth. Beady and unblinking.

The want is to scream, yet the sight is… so Satisfying.

Behind it, slithering slowly, is another creature. Less humanoid than the tall insect. This one looks be
a molten heart - body hot and dripping. Its backside is a large lump that pulses in tandem with its movements, glowing red and yellow as if colored glass. Strands of itself pour from it, burning the dry grass and dirt as it stands beside the Insect. Their appearance and their calm languid movements do not connect, almost as if they expect a conversation.

In taking in their appearance, I realize Idrilla is screaming enough for the both of us, tugging at my shoulder with her wounded arm. Unable to respond, she starts to back away but does not yet sprint.

I can’t bring myself to do the same. Instead, these damned legs move forward, compelled to meet them despite all rationale urging and pleading. Just minutes earlier I clearly thought through a highly violent and tense situation, planning to kill monsters and in specific order. Now, I have no idea what the fuck is happening or why this urge cannot be controlled.

The tall insect kneels in nearing, the nightmarish face tilting towards the ground. It extends an open hand, uncurling fingers that are as sharp as nano-razors. Several reflections of myself stare back from those black, unblinking eyes.

My mind screams to move to turn and run. Yet, the Hunger stays, a Need so achingly close. Its as if I am witnessing myself in a dream or an out of body experience. There is no hesitation in moving to touch, to caress it. My hand is dwarfish in comparison, its dagger-like fingers the length of my forearm. Just as my index and thumb touch the stone-like skin of its palm, a burst of mist erupts on contact, blinding in light and in opacity. My voice cries out, but I cannot hear it. Pain? Satisfaction? Both? The only sound is a constant hum, followed by a thick thrumming.

Eyes clamping shut as the sensation of Hunger is sated, plunging into the depths of whatever this creature is.

It calls, and it pushes, and it pulls. Then it is removed, emptied, and I feel… Full. Content. For now.

The weight lifts partially. Opening my eyes, the insect is gone and what stands before me is… far more humanoid in shape than what was just there. Through it I can see the tree line and the other creature that now approaches. This other creature has its head downcast and its molten, oozing hand extended.

The process repeats - I am unable to control myself in reaching out the second time. Heat rolls from this one, burning almost, but a sinful relief drowns again. That same effect, the same sensation. Absorption, Consuming, Fullness. It emptied.

Hunger sated.

I feel a sense of control and awareness return and with it I snatch my hand away from the second translucent figure. Clutching my hand to my chest, I retreat back, though I nearly stumble over the body of a fallen elf.

Where two monsters had been stand instead incorporeal humans. What started as a trip to bring someone dried flowers ended in mass murder, monsters, and ghosts.

“Andra!” Idrilla’s distant voice grows closer. I continue to tread backwards from the unable to look away from them, stopping only as they begin to speak, or at least what I assume is speech. Mouths, if they have them, remain stationary. Yet, sounds flow from them as they move to bend forward in a deep bow.

"Limitless beckoning towards the Expanse is not a voyage the whole can embark on,"

Idrilla is at my side before I see her, her voice frantic in my ear. The apparitions stand upright and
seem to speak to Idrilla in my stead. She corrals me behind her with the one free hand, babes in the other. The apparitions nod to Idrilla, their last words willowy before they fade into air, into nothing.

After a heaving sigh, Idrilla jerks around, regarding me in a way that I don’t understand. Threatening? Upset? Concern? Guilty of something? If so, what and how?

“Can you tell me what that was?! This is insanity, Idrilla! Why did we come out here?!?” now that sense trickles back in, my voice cracks as I spill in English. She continues to stare as I rub at my face, startled at the sensation of blood being there. I wipe again, it looks like spatters. Perhaps from shooting the creatures. A shudder suppressed.

Idrilla draws in a shaky breath, closing her eyes and shaking her head as the boy with his face buries his face into her good shoulder, the baby braced against her chest.

“We must leave. There must be a rift nearby… It’s too dangerous to try to care for the dead. What just happened… What you did - they’ll have to figure it out back at Skyhold.” Idrilla bites out, harsh before trailing into a line of forlorn uncertainty.

Heading back to Skyhold - a good idea. Looking down, my hands still shake. After a few steps, Idrilla stops to pass the baby into my arms, but not without the toddler struggling and crying out in protest. Once he settles, we move the way we came, threading back into the forest. Shouldering my pack, baby in one arm, I make note pick up the gifted bow on the hill just beyond the forest.

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**Log - Thedas Day 50**

 Barely slept, but Idrilla, Panenlan, and Rasa slept soundly each evening.

 Why is this weakness so profound?

 Why cannot I adjust?

 Why?

The walk back to Skyhold takes a day longer than the departure due to the child and the babe. The fatigue and trauma now extends itself. Idrilla spoke little. I spoke less. The time spent within Skyhold with its quaint magic and horned people had been uneventful compared to that afternoon. Fortunate that our walk back was just as uneventful, too.

With the child and the baby, named Panenlan and Rasa, respectively, I had expected them to be more unrestful given what they witnessed… Also given that their parents are likely dead. However, they slept soundly; not waking once when resting at night. Idrilla had been the same despite crying herself to sleep.

Unlike them, I just... couldn't.

Not after seeing those people. And those creatures. And ghosts? I can’t explain it, not any of it. I’ve accepted this isn’t a dream; this *is* the prelude to madness.

When approaching Skyhold, Idrilla takes off with a few words to meet medics, children in her arms. I, instead, search for Favrun, ignoring the odd stares thrown my way.

At this time of day, late afternoon, she will be in the kitchens to help prepare evening meals. Skyhold is bustling compared to the days before Idrilla and I had left. I hear the word ‘Inquisitor’ several times
in passing. Mahanon and company must have returned.

Avoiding the main entrance and the eyes in power that are stationed there, I make straight for the worker’s entrance. The door to the kitchen is propped open with a barrel, upon which a dwarf, nose deep in a book, rests. They give me a quick eyes-only body check before returning to the book. In the stone halls wafts a now welcome, bland scent.

The main workplace of the kitchen is full of working elves and dwarves, a couple humans about them. Heat pours into the room from the rounded stone ovens, fire lapping at a bubbling cauldron of stew.

I find Favrun easily. She’s flush against a work table, rolling out a massive pile of dough with master’s efficiency. Flour dusts her work coat. Other elves see me first, their faces paling.

Favrun lifts her head, then turns. Our eyes meet. Her face is at first blank, amber and sienna eyes widening as she drops the dough in her hands to the floor. Flour covers her tanned hands and dusts along her front.

“Andra!” her tone is sharp, worried as she darts over, her grip immediately upon my shoulders, then cheeks.

The sound of her voice and her seeming concern permits me the first real emotion outside of shock in several days. My vision immediately blurs. I cover my crumpling face with my hands to hide an ugly, painful sob.

“What happened? Where’s Idrilla?” She pulls my hands from my face, her thumb against my cheek. "Whose blood is this?!"

The rest of the staff look on, tense, worried.

Into her hands I cry harder.

Chapter End Notes

Just as Andra began to develop a sense of self in Thedas, albeit slowly and sheltered within, it’s time to rip it out from under her and undo all the progress she made!
Clark Ashton Smith - *Lines on a Picture*

O face upturned to alien splendors!
Sybil, what visions have you seen
In haunted worlds? what music hearkened
In Edens hushed and vespertine?

The far is near, the near is distant
For you that dwell in dreams untold...
And yet... and yet... perchance not wholly
Their riddled meaning lies unrolled.

Perchance your mouth is strangely wistful
For hidden things you know not of:
Your eyes forget, your lips remember
Some lost and Atlantean love.

The weeks away from Skyhold had ultimately been an errand run across the lands of Southern reaches of Thedas. Of the little time spent in negotiations, few had been held with dignitaries or those possessing powerful influence.

Instead, the Inquisitor’s efforts were propagated towards smaller Dalish clans both in Orlais and Ferelden. These meetings with the tribes further founded contempt for what could only be described as ignorance and brutish hostility. Nine clans had been reached - seven agreeing to impart forces with the Inquisition.

Of human dignitaries, two Bannorn’s and one Arling had been sought from Ferelden’s noble circles. Orlais, outside of the Dalish contacts, held scant human associates outside of Madame de Fer’s consortium.

While many sought to consul the Inquisitor on politically sensitive matters, he remained stalwart in decisions to solidify pacts with the Dalish clans above all else. Despite what outside perceptions of a haphazardly formed religious-political power gathering modern elves in droves could be seen as.

His vallaslin dedicated to Elgar’nan further apt each passing day.

In addition to the Dalish reconnaissance, several tense instances were dissolved along the Storm Coast and off the edge of the Korcari Wilds, erring into the wetlands of the Fallow Mire. Red lyrium infestations, ever growing in number, marked on maps for later destruction.

This path, treacherous as it was, allowed for the activation of numerous Elvhen artifacts. Even now it is fortunate that none remember their true purpose.

The return had been near morning day break. Time since had been spent bathing and unpacking the tomes, herbs, and various trinkets collected for personal use. Now mid-afternoon, seated within the blank space of the rotunda, thoughts drift toward to, easily, one of the more complicated additions to the Inquisition, Andromeda.
One of thousands. Though none made quite the same entrance. Rising, I close the tome of Orlesian politics, the binding crackling in protest.

In the first week, I grew increasingly aware of massive wards that even alluded my own knowledge and application. These migrant wards, if that’s what they truly are, halt any insight, from outside of the Fade or within it.

For one to create and sustain barriers with such consistent permanence is rare - exceptionally so. Additionally, there’s the unparalleled resistance to magic. After she had first appeared, I had repaired her oblong vision with only minor difficulties. Yet every attempt after, her flesh resisted all intervention. Even the black piercing refused to heal, which I no longer believe to be Blighted.

At one point, feeling lost and frustrated, speculation drifted towards her being kindred to Cole... A misplaced spirit within delicate housing. But I fear that the wrong conclusion as well.

For what little is known, she could be a mage - one of enormous potential, yet insidiously untrained. Despite that resistance to magic and those impenetrable barriers, she had not displayed further propensity for Elemental, Force, or Fade magic. Her fair, unmarred skin did not belong to that of a blood mage. That left Blight magic… but this did not seem apt, either as no medic seemed concerned or aware of blight sickness.

And then her pure, unadulterated awe when witnessing even the simplest of spells cast. That the most peculiar of all, if not endearing.

The Spymaster had sent a missive a month prior while we still roamed the Storm Coasts to inform that Andromeda would be assisting one of the Spymaster's agents. Any protest I had with the idea of someone so sheltered being sent out to hunt held little weight given my absence.

That, and Leliana possessed the acumen to justify her decision. The first reason was to send Andromeda hunting with someone who was considered a confidant. If her inability to speak Trade or any other viable language was a ruse.

The second being practical - to assist in gathering resources.

This had been last word, and the Council had not yet met to discuss our journey and the progress of other

The sun wanes in the sky once Andromeda’s peculiar thrumming through and against the Veil returns. Faint, at first, until it is steady like a blowing wind. The notion that her presence could be distinguished already alarming, but now more so. The hum beats, erratic or... panicked.

Enough so that I decide to seek out the Spymaster for status updates.

The trapse upwards is a near silent one, the library filled with focused minds. Illuminated specks of dust float around them and if one weren’t aware of each sigh or occasional shift in posture, one might mistake the scene a stasis. Sitting at a table with a book propped in his lap, is the Tevinter altus, Dorian.

Gazing at nothing, Dorian frowns deeply with a quirked brow, as if listening… I pay little heed aside from reading his expression before ducking into the final stairwell.

Once atop the banister, the scene is of Leliana leaning against a windowsill, the light of early evening rimming her darkened silhouette. She faces Mahanon who sits astride her desk. He is in traditional Dalish garb and his black hair, wet and unbraided from bathing, spills down his back and shoulders.
“Inquisitor,” A nod in acknowledgement before addressing The Spymaster. “I’ve come to ask about the foreign woman, Andromeda. I’ve… sensed her return just now,” As I speak, a peculiar expression, one of anger, flickers before she quickly melts into the cool, calm headed individual I experience and expect her to be.

“Oh. That is... something I had yet to inform you of, Inquisitor,” she sounds unusually cautious, still facing me but eyes darting to Mahanon. “The agent I stationed her with to hunt disregarded orders to stay within a day’s distance of the hold. They left six days ago and had not returned. Until now.”

“What?” Mahanon pips his way out of his listening silence, voicing my own shock. “One of your little birds took off?”

Leliana evens her brow before training her pale, aquiline eyes upon mine.

“Idrilla desired to visit a lover within a Dalish clan, Rethman’an but had not yet been given leave. Another agent had seen them traveling south, four days ago but that is all I’ve heard thus far.” she pauses to unfold her arms and steps forward, placing a gloved hand on a stack of unused parchment. “Given that you know of their return, I’m to assume Andromeda still… vibrates?” she phrases carefully, to which I gift a wry smile.

“In some way, yes, but it seems... altered. Which is the reason for inquiry.” I look to Mahanon who wears perplexion. “When we spoke of it before leaving for the Southern Wilds, I had mentioned that she was possibly a mage- uniquely connected to the Fade. Given our immediate departure, I hadn’t the time to understand how.”

“Ah,” he nods to be polite as he possessed little patience for understanding outside swords and axes.

“Leliana, I must speak with-” a voice unknown to me filters through the stairwell, growing louder with their rushing steps until they stop in the doorway. Mahanon and I both turn to look at the newcomer: a sienna skinned elf with cropped hair. She wears a generous layer of dirt and dried blood, especially so along her right shoulder. Her clothing is in tatters, covered in the same blood that flecks along her skin, dried a ruddy shade of umber. A grievous wound, scabbed garishly across the expanse of her shoulder - noting rapid healing via poultice rather than magic.

“By the creators, what happened to you?” Mahanon laughs incredulously to cover his gawking at her state of dress.

“Idrilla, I’m glad to see you’ve returned.” the displeasure in Leliana’s voice, hardly there to those unobservant, is enough to make the Mahanon flinch. The intended effect is likely for Idrilla, but she remains unphased as she steps forward, regaining a large, singular breath.

“Clan Rethman’an was attacked. There were red templars. We arrived too late. There must’ve been a rift nearby as demons-” Idrilla spoke so quickly that Mahanon lifts both hands, the imbued one crackling at the swift movement, to pace the onslaught.

“Slow down… You’re making my head spin. Demons, Templars, Rethman’an?”

“And Andromeda?” I add, noticing distinct lack of her mention. Idrilla regards me for the first time, her dark eyes widening in tight-lipped thought. Another round of deep suspiration before she eases while facing her employer with dedicated resolve. A good agent.

“I went against restrictions, I understand and will honor any punishment you see fit, but please let me speak of what took place,” Idrilla’s voice is erratic but firm. Given what she had just mentioned, this is hardly something that the Inquisitor nor Leliana could ignore.
“My intention was to be gone for five days. To bring dried Crystal Grace to a friend who belonged to the clan. When we were close enough to where they were traveling through the Arbor Wilds - I saw fire and heard screaming from where they said they’d be camped. I ran ahead. There were… Red templars and almost everyone had been slaughtered.” her voice waivers but she squares her shoulders to continue reporting. “I ran into the scene without thinking. There were seven or eight of them, and I was met with one of their axe’s. I thought us dead. Andromeda, however, killed all of them shortly after I fell.”

“Andromeda killed... By herself?” Mahanon’s voice is laced with skepticism and I steal a glance of Leliana who also wears an expression of surprise.

“She used… a small metal thing to rupture their heads. It was as if they were smashed from the inside out and it sounded like thunder. I could not see how it worked as I was cut down. When they were gone, she helped me to healing poultices. When I was ready to stand, I had us search the aravels. Andromeda, shortly after, found two children whose parents were among the dead.”

Mahanon exhales, wide eyes looking to the ground as he lets the gravity of this tale wash over him. This level of violence not uncommon in Ferelden, but still horrific that an entire clan nearly eradicated - a low blow especially after Corypheus’ attack on Haven that left so many without families or completely displaced, and especially so to an Inquisitor who seeks to unite his clans.

“Andromeda had been acting strange throughout it all; I thought it her addled nature, but as we were gathering the children, demons filtered through the trees. They were calm, moving as any complicit being would. They acted nothing like the violent creatures torn from the rifts.

“I screamed for her to get back, but she walked to them and when she touched them, something happened - a blinding flash of some kind and a strange sound. When I could see, it had changed. They both changed.” Idrilla’s pace speeds up, her eyes unfocused as she recalls the experience, expression confused and disbelieving.

“They changed into softer visions and then spoke in Elvish; I couldn’t understand most of it... Something of pain. Then… they just… disappeared. Andromeda was dazed after. I thought it too dangerous to linger so we left with the children.”

The dead air that falls upon the room is all encompassing as we stare agape. Idrilla stands limply, as if recounting the experience removed a great deal of weight from her small shoulders. This would certainly explain the difference I feel pulsing against the veil. If some kind of exchange took place...

“Where is she? What is her behavior now?” Leliana is the first to break the silence and her question is directed towards Idrilla before she turns to me, our eyes meeting knowingly.

“I had asked her to wait by the gates as I brought the children to the medical tents, but she wandered off. She likely sought Favrun out. As for her behavior… while I do not have much experience with demons or spirits, she seemed as normal as could be. Too shocked to sleep, but that’s all I noticed.” Idrilla’s voice is steadier now, shoulders still squared.

“Well…” Mahanon takes this opportunity to push himself off of Leliana’s desk, landing deftly on his feet and without sound. “That is a lot to take in from one report.” his tone is and odd combination of playful and grave, though a careful eye can take in his tensely set jaw.

Leilana shakes her head, a small grimace upon her as she turns away, facing the windows. “She has learned little Trade speak, but we must attempt to question her. To kill Red Templars and… alter demons... There is always the chance that she may have been possessed.”
“I agree; I considered her an anomaly before but this… gives us much to consider and to perhaps act on. As for possession: while spiritual corruption does not typically take one over in such a way, it is imperative that we are sure she is not dangerous,” I pause, the idea of a spirit willingly approaching Andromeda after witnessing Cole’s strict aversion seemed unlikely.

“Inquisitor, I think it wise to round Cassandra and Cullen to for their opinion. I will retrieve Andromeda.” This is not something to wait upon. By the expression both the Inquisitor and the Spymaster share, they agree.

Bowing, I turn to take my leave, Mahanon preparing to do the same.

In passing a second time, Dorian is back to pouring over his research. Still yet he wears a quizzical brow. Perhaps mages and other highly intuitives mistook it for the chaos of the Breach and all that remained after its impartial healing.

The very sense, the pressure against the veil pulse in a way that was almost compelling, making her an easy one to track. This thrumming, undoubtedly, has something to do with what Idrilla described during their encounter. Was it a calling? Why would it have had an effect on corrupted spirits? Suffering and hunger? Cole had once mentioned hunger...

Trailing the pressure brought me down into the lower quarters of the hold, near the kitchens. The scent of warm food and wine permeate the air and wet even my own appetite. There are a few resting rooms and large quarters down in the kitchens. I find myself in front of one, door closed but the thatch had not been turned and it remains unlocked. To gather what I can, I pause and listen for a tell. Inside, a voice speaks. Feminine, older, and entwined with concern - likely Favrun Nathis.

“And those must be demons… To the void with it all...” She hums and after a few moments, a softer, smokey tone responds with unfamiliar words, strained from recent tear shed. Andromeda.

With aural projection, I reach out to sense any kind of corruption but sense little… Save for retraction, a lessening in a way that I think to be shock. I furrow a brow but let it melt immediately.

Knocking at the door, three soft rapts, I fold my hands behind my back to wait for a reply. Their conversation ceases followed by the shuffling of wooden soles against the stone floor. With just a small crack, the door creaks open to reveal the elven matron. Favrun's red hair, delicately woven with threads of grey, first meets my eye before I take in her face. Her expression is aghast but firms up once upon recognition.

“Ser Solas,” she breathes, giving further foundation to her relief. “Something’s happened.”

"Of this I am aware. Idrilla has spoken with Inquisitor, The Spymaster, and myself. I came to collect Andromeda for further questioning.” I assure the elf and take a step forward to indicate my desire to enter. Regarding warily for a few moments, Favrun gives in, knowing me as a trusted companion to the Inquisitor. A perk I did enjoy but did not often abuse. She steps back, opening the door further to reveal Andromeda within.

I am shocked to take in the change two months made; her round, radiant cheeks had taken on a harsher edge. Her youthfulness remains still intact, yet changed, as she stares back with eyes that seem enlarged from the loss of volume. They glisten, having spent tears. Her pale hair is in its trademark thick braid, messier and longer. It drapes over the area where her obstinate wound lay and I wonder of it’s progress. She bears no additional wounds and carries considerably less grime than Idrilla - save for the dried blood that coats her clothing.

“Andromeda, despite the circumstances, I am glad to find that you remain,” a forced formality when
the words naturally would be 'You yet remain, why?' Even so, I measure my words calmly in nearing. With each step I take, she stiffens and the veil quivers.

“Hello, Solas,” her voice speaks with more confidence than the body language belays. Accent still thick, as she remains seated. Her hands are folded in her lap, one of her black, sleek mechanical quills underneath her palms.

“There hasn't been much time between duties to teach her better Trade so she’s been drawing to show me what took place.” Favrun retakes her space beside Andromeda.

“May I?” her fingers wrap around two sheets of impossibly thin parchment, likely from Andromeda's tomes. Favrun waits for Andromeda to nod agreement, only then lifting them to me.

The finely made sheets quaver, rustling against the air as I look down: there were several sketches, quickly drawn, but with a well-practiced hand. The drawings are of Templars infected with Red Lyrium, horrific faces. Beside that, a rough map of what I assume to be the camp where the Dalish clan had been slaughtered; several simplified bodies with frowns, pointed ears, closed eyes, and red wine to signify blood.

Beneath that is a simplistic drawing of Idrilla with a cleft taken out of her shoulder, red wine still wet and blooming around her. Underneath that was an unexpectedly crude, frog-like, drawing of what I assume is meant to portray Andromeda as it is attached to a long braid.

Incredulous, I turn the sheet back to her, pointing to the drawing “This is you?”

“Andromeda,” she nods so matter-of-factly and without an ounce of sarcasm that it forces an inappropriate chuckle from the back of my throat.

The ugly drawing of Andromeda is holding an item pointed towards a red templar, a dashed line leading to a head that appears to be coming apart. So her and Idrilla’s stories align, something of positive note.

In fact, they almost all align save for the bottom of the second page when the ugly drawing of Andromeda is standing next to a long, pointed body, a Terror demon. Instead of the Andromeda figure having features, it is blackened, leaving only a silhouette. The last drawing is of the ugly Andromeda, no longer a silhouette, but frowning and swirls for eyes.

“How about what happened - Thank the Maker she’s alright, but what did Idrilla say?” Favrun interrupts in a well-meaning manner despite the urgency in her voice.

“It is best if we take Andromeda first to speak with her, to understand what took place.” the softest 'this is above your station and clearance' I could deliver.

“I see,” Favrun gives a tight pause before gently caressing Andromeda’s shoulder, pointing to me and then the door. “Go with Ser Solas; the advisors and the Inquisitor want to know what you’ve seen,” Apprehension washes over Andromeda, her wide eyes flickering across Favrun’s lined face as she listens, likely only understanding a small portion of what was said. I take a step back, parchment in one hand, and turn towards the door. Noting to myself, it is important to inquire about the relationship that has developed between them; Favrun seems to care deeply for this relative, potentially dangerous, stranger.

Andromeda nods in solemn understanding and rises, sparing me only one look before she stoops to scoop up a leather pack. After adjusting, she exits the room with even steps. I see they have given her a more standard state of dress; blue tunic with black leather leggings and a black bustier. I prefer
her form fitting clothes but it is likely they no longer fit.

“Thank you, Favrun; your assistance is appreciated.” I bow as I leave and then meet Andromeda’s side just outside the room. I begin our pace, tossing glances once every so often. She does not once rise to meet mine so we walk wordlessly, I ahead by several steps. There is a hesitance about her as we enter the halls towards the Library. I avoid my unused space in the rotunda and enter the stairwell in the main hall, as it is a quicker route.

Dorian stands as we enter the library, and this time, he intercepts.

“Ah, the Princess and the Apostate,” he says through a smirk but his unease shines through his eyes as he drifts over Andromeda.

“Princess?” I prompt, knowing well the origin of this nickname - the scent of embrillium hair oil accompanying the memory.

“Varric’s name for her; apt, isn’t it? Charmingly plump thing with all that pale hair, always wandering around like she’s lost, only plays with the elves and the animals, cries prettily in seven shades of demure. Don’t you agree?” Dorian lilts his hip to the side as he twines his mustache. While rude to speak of someone in such a way, in front of them no less, circumstances allowed for it.

“It is true; she does not denote to be of common ilk,” chuckling, I look to Andromeda to gauge her reaction, unsurprising to see her admiring the library with a state of awe.

“I haven’t seen her doe-eyed wandering in a week. Heard she took a trip with one of the hunters, the scrapped one that barreled up stairs after you...” There is an unbidden question hidden within his statement. It was well known that Andromeda had been the one to carry the Mahanon to safety after the fall of Haven, but not much talk had circulated as to why - just rumors to her visual similarity to their messiah.

“Something did take place. If you are able, I’m sure your assistance will be appreciated. Mahanon will be returning shortly with the Seeker and the Knight-Commander.” Offered only because I know he would reject, Dorian does just so.

“Ah… It sounds… serious; I will cautiously await any further news while you all tarry about.” He lingers upon Andromeda who now has brought herself to the conversation; he dips his head “My dear,” and she silently ducks her head in kind. We continue towards Leliana’s study and I stand aside to usher her up the stairwell first.

Leliana and Idrilla wait by the window, speaking quietly amongst themselves as we make it to the top. Both turn, and dropping all conversation.

“Andromeda,” Leliana begins, her posture austere.

“Hello,” another dip of Andromeda’s curly blonde head.

“May I look at your gun?” Leliana wastes no time, asking for what I assume to be the weapon she used on the templars.

“Yes,” Andromeda complies by setting her bag down to retrieve something from the bottom. What she pulls out is one of her heavier, obtuse items - akin to an unfinished grip of a crossbow and a tattered parchment box. Leliana flicks her fingers in a ‘hithering’ motion once Andromeda is upright and I now notice several newly placed straw training standees lined against the back wall.

As Leliana takes the metal grip for inspection, Mahanon returns with Cullen and Cassandra. They
are first heard, stomping up the stairs with the familiar clank of metal. Once in the office, I see they bear the sweat of training. I’d understand Cullen doing so, but Cassandra only having just recently returned signifies a potential frustration - concerning her almost lover?

“Makers breath,” Cullen breathes at the sight of Idrilla. “So, what’s this about?” The Knight-Commander immediately draws to his sense of duty, squaring up as he looks to Leliana and myself. He closes the distance and gives an accusing look to both Andromeda and Idrilla.

“Idrilla, if you will…” Leliana prompts of her subordinate - who takes the next few minutes to recount. As she does, Cullen and Cassandra both pale and look to Andromeda with wariness earned by the training and rites of orthodox religion. Not a logical thought in their head, simply reflex by the word of their faith.

“By all, this one’s a bit odd, but corruption doesn’t ooze from her. Given the templars and trained mages that we do have within the ranks, someone would have noticed. What’s this about the exploding weapon? I had been told that the only thing she knew how to use was a crossbow, and barely that.” Cullen drags his eyes over Andromeda several times, attempting to find his own belief.

“As did I; I was training her how to use it when we were hunting. She does have an uncommonly good eye, however.” Idrilla adds to confirm and a smirk of pride flexes, knowing that it was likely my reparation.

“Show us, Andromeda?” Leliana’s tone does not infer that it is a request as she places the grip within Andromeda’s hands. A test. The pale glove of the Spymaster points first to the gun, and then the row of five dummies strewn against the wall, about ten paces away.

Andromeda’s eyes follow the lead and she ‘hmms’ in discomfort, aware that she was the center of subtly hostile attention. She speaks a few words in her tongue before looking back to Leliana, nodding.

We all watch as she releases a mechanism in the grip with a cleft, something I hadn’t inspected given all of her other strange belongings. With a ginger touch, she slides open the tattered box and withdraws eight glistening metal points, similar to exceptionally dull arrowheads. In this moment, I am wondering if this is some kind of minute hand-cannon.

Once eight of these metal points are inside of the metal cleft, she places shoves it back inside the grip, a loud click snapping throughout the room. For only a moment, Andromeda places the metal grip on the desk and motions to cover her ears.

“Are we sure we want her to demonstrate it here? It’s… loud.” Idrilla winces, but Leliana shakes her head once in refusal.

“We must be shown so that we may understand what kind of weapon it is.” the Spymaster is resolute in her statement and I wonder how much of the Inquisition rests on her efforts versus Mahanon’s. Leliana nods to Andromeda again, gesturing to the hay training standees.

With a quick glance around the room, Andromeda recognizes that only Idrilla remains interested in stoppering their ears.

Andromeda sighs and straightens her arm, this gun in a white knuckled grip. Those wide set eyes focus, pupils blooming into an eerily impassive expression. She releases a trigger.

I am a fool to not heed her warning.

Five times - the concussive reverberation that follows each shot was so incredibly resounding that
even I crouch down in reflex; it bounces around in my skull, shaking within my eye sockets. Each thunderous expulsion more damaging than the last. The rest in the room commit to the same crouch. Save for Idrilla who merely flinches.

Once I’m upright, I take in the state of the training The heads of the five were all missing, straw floating in the air like a dry, golden mist.

“Andraste’s tits!” Mahanon laughs, releasing his ears as he stands from the low offensive crouch he also had fallen into. “We need more of those!”

Cullen, Cassandra, and Leliana watch the straw flutter to the floor, all a mixture of startlement or fear.

Andromeda says nothing but lays the gun on Leliana’s desk after snapping a small button on the side, folding her hands in front of her hips.

“Andromeda - Do you think yourself capable of casting Smite?” Leliana bites out to break the silence; she is angry, likely for a variety of reasons but that seems cruel and unnecessary given Andromeda’s constant willingness. Anomalies aside.

“I find that to be a rash decision,” I firmly spar with her to show disdain. “We are still unsure if she is a mage. I do not know if she still resists healing.”

“If she is not a mage, then no harm will fall her, correct? It will only course through, rather than cut her connection to the Fade?” the spymaster bores into Cullen who’s brows dip in realization of his ensnarement for an opinion.

“Well, yes,” he begins, his exasperation apparent. “But, even though we’ve stationed her alongside the other untrained circle mages from Kirkwall, none have spoken anything of magical ability. Rather, a distinct lack of them.” Cullen works away from making the decision. “They did say they slept exceptionally well once she joined them, however.” he adds in passing.

“Inquisitor, would you allow this?” Leliana cuts before me and I feel a frown deepen. I would wait to see what his response was before I would allow ire to consume me.

“If she’s not a mage, then there’s no harm. If she is, then she’ll rest afterwards.” Mahanon speaks of it so plainly and I get a glimpse of why I am so resolute in my Purpose.

“How calming it is to see that severing one's connection to the Fade is treated with the same care as a Fennec scratch,” I’m unable to hide the acerbic tone at the loss of this standoff with the Spymaster. Shifting, I fold my arms over my chest, mindful of the drawings still in my hand.

Mahanon shrugs. “I understand your concerns, Solas. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have sided with the Mages first.” Ah, so that is partly the reason. To conscript the mages, but frame it as merely a choice - to use them in leverage. “No one can seem to make a decision - so I’m allowing it. It would also confirm that she’s susceptible to possession. The last thing I want is an abomination running throughout the Inquisition because we took pity.” There’s the Dalish I know. I shake my head as Cullen shuffles towards Andromeda, the discussion over and decision made.

Andromeda eyes Cullen, completely unaware of what might happen next. To be the recipient of a Holy Smite from the templars is painful, even for one such as myself. While Andromeda is moderately tall, Cullen dwarfs her in a way that is needlessly brutal.

The Knight-Commander's clawed greaves reach for the bare part of her shoulder. His palm glows with the telltale sign of his command and his addiction to Lyrium, though far weaker in luminosity.
Likely his lack of lyrium consumption.

When he places it over her chest, it pulses brighter, but elicits no reaction save for a quick, awkward glance around the room.

It is both relieving and irritating to witness this.

“There is… nothing that I can interrupt. I do, however, feel… odd... As if... I am reaching into water...” Cullen speaks, withdrawing his hand, a curious look about him. “Do you have a lyrium poultice on you? Do you have lyrium?” Cullen asks slowly.

“Lyrium,” Andromeda nods without so much of a care that she may have faced serious harm. She withdraws a small object from a waist pocket, wrapped in cloth. All gasp as she unfurls a hunk of pure, raw lyrium, glowing far brighter than even I remember natural veins doing so. Andromeda, however, looks perplexed at the sight of it.

“Red,” she lifts it up, her eyes darting to mine. I grit my teeth in reflex as she touches the stone with bare flesh. Touching unrefined lyrium has been known to kill any ordinary mage - the amount of filtration it must go through to become consumable toxic to even dwarves.

“Red?” Mahanon asks, his mouth dry at this display. “Red lyrium?”

“Red Lyrium,” Andromeda nods as she turns to me to slip one of her drawings from my grip. She points to a drawing of the infected Templar. "Red Lyrium.” “Skyhold, Blue.”” She babbles a few words in her tongue, strung together far better than her Trade.

“Maybe you were right about her being a dwarf, Cullen. A tall, purifying dwarf. Or maybe she’s a dwelf...” Mahanon lets out a sharp, bewildered laugh as he runs his hand through his hair. His next action is to bump his hip into Cassandra's, not without purpose, as Cassandra seemed silent for most of this. Her sharp eyes observing all.

“We’ve all known mages of unimaginable gifts, but this…” Cassandra pauses and I hang onto my breath to hear what she says next “It could be beneficial to the Inquisition. It is best, I think, to test the extent of her faculty. If she maintains mental acuity after altering lyrium, and from… changing demons. This could be a boon...”

“Yes” I agree, for once finding common ground with the Seeker. “Given we have little insight in this, we must also do what we can to keep this quiet for now.” I shoot a look to Idrilla, the only one outside of the Inquisitor’s inner circle. “I also think it best that she begin a strict schedule to educate her in Trade. We know so little due to our inability to properly communicate."

“Well, we have several rifts to close in that area. Plenty of demons for her to tame.” Mahanon nods his head, a slight smirk about him to cover his nerves.

Andromeda places the blue lyrium on Leliana’s desk and the the burning of a thousand questions courses through.

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**Glossary**

**Lyrium** — Lyrium is a valuable but dangerous mineral-like substance. Bianca Davri claims the mineral is extremely volatile and sometimes explodes for no reason. Physical contact with raw lyrium ore will cause serious injury and psychological damage for humans or elves, and will kill mages outright.
Even though dwarves have a natural resistance, raw lyrium is dangerous for all but the most experienced of the Mining Caste to handle. Even for dwarves, exposure to the unprocessed mineral can cause deafness or memory loss. For humans and elves, direct contact with lyrium ore produces nausea, blistering of the skin, and dementia. Mages cannot even approach unprocessed lyrium. Doing so is invariably fatal.

Red lyrium is a rare, more potent and more addictive form of raw lyrium created when normal lyrium is corrupted by the taint.
Coiling Tendrils

Log - Thedas Day 51

There are monsters, multiple kinds.

Templars are mutants?

What were the other things? How...?

Lyrium - emits light, should use phone.

Find clear glass, clear water... Spectrophotometer.

What is causing it to change? Me? Not good.

Solas did something again. Solas is always doing something.

Hostility has risen - this attention is dangerous.

If tension were a solid, I’d have suffocated upon entering this room. I allow myself to be defenseless against it; let my palms sweat and let the tightening ball of nervousness sit idly at the bottom of my stomach. I place the blue stone, not long ago red, on the paper stacked desk. I, better than most, understand light emission and what could stimulate it, but in this circumstance for a pebble to emit such consistent light… and am unnerved by this change.

Regardless, it does not seem to matter to those around me; instead, perhaps they think I’ve personally wronged this specific pebble. By the looks I’ve received since coming up those stairs, I am a villain that forces men in feather cowls to pat my shoulder and one that brings home mood rocks. Blue is for fear, right?

Leliana and Solas have powerful, spine straightening stares; Leliana is angry, but for what? Not telling her I had a gun? For her not knowing what it is? My belongings had been ransacked before. How am I to communicate what my things are if no one asks? I could have crawled out of the pits of hell and they still wouldn’t know much about me beyond the fact that I have blonde hair.

Solas’ expression is darker, confusing. Scarier, given the pronounced, elongated features of elven anatomy. It demands explanations for more than just the stone. I avoid his eyes by pretending to look out the balcony, investing some appreciation on the goldenrod sky against the mountains.

I try to gauge how I feel. Nerves from the last few days are lessening and now irritation and fatigue are starting to wheedle into finer points. No one has attempted, or offered, to explain to me what those red stone monsters were, nor do they seem affected that twenty to thirty people lay dead in the forest, or what the other monsters that shifted into ghosts are, or why these stones potentially change colors… Perhaps I am expecting too much of these people who haven’t bothered to ask anything beyond simple things. I should have known to expect such a serious lack of information.
There’s some conversation between group and I am left out, despite it very clearly about me. Idrilla leaves, only to return a few minutes later with the crate of my belongings that had been stored underneath my bed.

I do not object because I am afraid of what will happen if I do.

Idrilla places the crate on the desk and turns away. Briefly, we connect, but before I can read whatever emotion is there, Idrilla is promptly dismissed and I am left alone with five agitated military administrators.

It is more alarming than I realize it would be a second time around.

I am tasked with going through the contents of the crate and my hiking pack, pointing out which were weapons - only three items could truly count; bear mace, a hatchet, and a hunting knife. There isn't a shred of surprise that the Remington, the 199 rounds remaining, a hatchet for firewood, and the bear mace were swiftly confiscated from my personal belongings.

Not surprised, but definitely annoyed.

The weighted awareness of my existence was bothersome before, but it is smothering now as I stand crowded while I sort through everything to my name.

I don’t waste time explaining in English, or in broken Trade. Instead, I slowly measure the pace of my actions, the swipe of lipstick, the touch of lotion, the motion of eating. Leilana’s rigidity has softened after critically going through the most common of my belongings- the two exchanges of clothes that are now too loose, makeup that I don’t use as it stands out, camping supplies, and a few other things of simple use. I see her, in the corner of my eye, drifting over the items of higher tech.

Solas first touches my phone. The sun’s warmth glints off of the reflective surface and to scatter a few bright refractions against the stone and wood lined ceiling. Whatever interest he had in it had not lessened in his time away. The phone had died in my absence from Skyhold and I check the power cable along the solar powerbank on my pack, hoping there is enough to charge. They all watch this process - something too complicated to explain with my lack of their tongue.

Once it powers on, I drag my thumb over the power sensor as to not reveal the passcode. As far as they knew, this was the only way to open a phone and it should remain that way. The screen flashes open. It still reads 2:59p CST, December XX and I sigh.

Murmurs follow around me.

I drag my finger across the screen before I open up old texts, ignoring some messages that are still dangerous and painful. Important to choose a benign conversation, nothing too personal, so I open one from an endearing undergraduate freshman who had sent pictures of their summer trip before everything went to utter shit.

Seeing her happy eyes - a tiny voice, hidden deeply within my own psyche, wonders if she still lives.

It is likely she doesn't.

Turning the phone away from myself, five sets of eyes lean in to look at the picture of a smiling
woman’s selfie as she dangled above a verdant cliff while strapped in a neon yellow harness. I swipe to the next, she’s now jet skiing with two friends in an alcove somewhere off of Honolulu. Another swipe to play a video of her swimming underwater with dolphins. Solas pulls the phone from my hands, gently, firmly, and without asking, to watch more closely; his brow furrowed deep.

I move on to the next item, leaving him to it.

These people still utilized paintings - I had seen them everywhere, but not a single photograph, so I find this better to demonstrate than to babble incoherently. The photo album is filled with private takes though I’m sure they had been looked at numerous times. Pointing to a benign snap of my since passed Sehkmet, I motion to the camera by switching on the power button.

The five all shift backwards as the camera’s light hums in readiness; before anything else is said, I take a picture of Leliana whose expression grows frighteningly dark as the white film spits out the top, murmurs following. I shake the polaroid twice before handing it over to the livid red head just as her milky green outline appears. Even Solas has paused his perusal to watch.

All five do, entranced as a captured outline of Leliana gazes out of the snapshot.

More murmurs as it is passed between them; they all do various things though they often look at the backside. Perhaps to see if it is a trick of the eye. Which, technically, it is is.

Once the color sits and sets, Leliana pockets her new portrait, and points to radio-talkies, powerful and expensive ones that I had splurged on two years ago. They had a distance of fifty-one point three miles, good for when a mountaineering party splits. Better for when I had wanted to find the darkest recesses of land with no fear of light polluting the skies for better star gazing.

I snap them on and wonder of gathering the proper materials to create my own solar pack as the batteries in these will eventually die.

Pausing - I realize this is the first time I have thought to organize outside of the habit of this place… The utilization of my skills in mathematics, especially applied, is the common man’s friend. Would I have benefited had I cared more during general biology or sought more from mechanical engineering? Yes, but it’s no use lamenting over that now. I am stunned. Have I really been in so deep a mental fog? I suppose if I am asking myself that question, I have been.

I speak into talkie, gallows humor appropriate here. “I hope you all know this feels like a witch trial,” my voice distorts from the closeness of the other in my hand. Passing it off to Mahanon, I give the other to Cassandra and point to the doorway, walking my fingers down an invisible set of stairs.

Luckily, Mahanon is quick to understand as he bounds down the stairs. Within seconds of the charade, his voice cuts through, clearer but still with the distorted warble of AM radio. Pointing to the correct button to allow intercom, Cassandra rolls her eyes while groaning, but does eventually respond. As her face burns a darker shade of tan, I wonder the nature of what had been said. Moments later Mahanon bounces back up stairs - an odd smile on his face.

The talkies are also confiscated.

Cullen touches the headphones; bluetooth. All the items they’ve wanted a demo of are plastic and I wonder if that is a resource they have not discovered the uses of yet. Good, I think to myself. They have monsters to worry about. They’d be doomed if they had to worry about pollution.

I tap Solas’ hand; when not taking in the talkies or the camera, he had quickly began clicking around
into the apps and, unfortunately, settled onto my private and expansive library of photos and videos of the past ten years. Fortunately, he was tapping through an album of wilderness travel. Nothing awkward or weird there. He had been paused on a photo of a peer’s white Jeep - I wonder, given that I’ve not seen a single vehicle outside of wagons and carriages, what he must think of it.

Pulling up the settings, I activate bluetooth sensing and sync the headphones. A few clicks and I open the music library and shuffle play. Riparian by Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith starts crooning. It is all a little surreal to me that these people are only just questioning me and the tech that I carry. Why now, I think to myself, as I slide the muffs over my ears for effect before passing them to Cullen. After a few moments of him struggling to fit them over his ears, I assist in placing them.

No one has asked what town I’ve come from, who my family is, how old I am, what my profession was and still could be.

"Music?" Cullen's voice is curious as his large hands make the headphones look minute in comparison. After a moment, and his brow rising, I nod slowly as if to agree.

He eyes me with a much more relaxed wariness than he had earlier as he removes the headphones from his own ears and passes them around. Leliana first, Mahanon, Cassandra, then Solas. He and Mahanon look the most odd with their pointed ears still sticking outwards.

Perhaps the advancement of technology had been outlawed. Maybe this is my truest, most violent crime and tomorrow morning I’d be on the chopping block. What a way to go after all of this. I allow myself one small chuckle at the absurd anti-climatic end, but with the sharp turns of all five heads in my direction, I immediately drop it.

Solas passes the headphones back, the music teetering into the next song, and they all begin to speak quickly, far faster than I can follow. Flickering between each of them, it is as if I have more in common with the items on the desk than I do with those surrounding. Perhaps they think me simply stupid instead of culturally ignorant… Perhaps they all seem so irritated because this is true and they are proven wrong.

I am finally allowed to leave, my crate lighter than when it had entered this room. Mahanon also speaks of the next morning, pointing to my bag… Worry builds that we will leave the hold again based on the next few sentences - Day, and a couple of familiar words. A pang of indignation at the unfairness of it courses through; I, literally, had only returned two hours ago.

If, for anything, I need that gun back - if those monsters are so common that everyone acknowledges them with passive acceptance, who knows what else exists. I’d laugh if there are fucking Dragons.

Cradling my belongings, I follow behind Solas who seems not only to enjoy leading others, but has the experience for it. The silence that seemed easy on the way up now uncomfortable and almost penetrating. He makes no move to hide his thoughtful staring before he takes a turn not in line with the way we’d come. Exhaling, I shake my head and roll my shoulders. Still better than Leliana’s office.

With Solas now several steps ahead, it is difficult not to focus on the oddly hypnotizing way his hips and buttocks tilt with each step.

“God, I’m tired,” I say aloud - which earns a look from over his shoulder. Any further ogling is kept to myself. It is only when we enter a room unfamiliar that I realize I’d paid no attention to where he was leading. Yes, tired.

Calling it a room doesn’t seem to serve it justice; rather, it is a multi-story tower, filled with nothing
but creamy blank brick walls, several scaffoldings carefully situated against them. Wooden buckets of what looks to be powder plaster litter the scaffoldings. Someone’s going to paint.

The sun is setting and fills the walls to an almost blinding gold. Turning, I face a desk with a high-back chair so that my eyes can adjust. Solas takes to standing at a desk that is placed precisely in the middle of the room and begins to sift through several worn books. As he finds what must be the right one, he turns and our gazes meet.

The waning light of the sky alters the grey of his irises to a hardened honey; his countenance is as confusing and as dark as it was earlier. More so now as he steps closer to place the book inside the crate, softly, on top of my journal. Glancing down, I take in the cover - worn from use and hand embossed. It is the same veinly, tanned brown that most of the books here are. When I look back up, he is still wearing that expression that attempts to place guilt for things I’m not sure I’ve done.

Several dreadfully uncomfortable moments pass. First, I am grateful when he starts to speak, secondly confused again as this language is different, longer, smoother. Beautiful, really. Spoken in a lower decibel and with an inflection at the end to indicate a question? His chest almost bumps into the crate before he motions for me to set it down. Again, not knowing the waters on which I travel, I comply and place it on the clean stone cobble. Once upright, I feel my braid sliding down my back, Solas having grabbed to move it mid bend. I wonder, while watching him withdraw his boney wrist, if he is aware of how close he always stands next to people.

He pauses and seems expectant with a lifted brow. When I do not answer, he speaks hushedly again, his tone firm yet still smooth and rhythmic. It sounds similar to the words that were spoken at the camp, between Panenlan and Idrilla… But different dialects? As I’m about to blurt some nonsense in Trade, he’s no longer talking. His eyes cast downward - the wound.

I’d looked at it not once in the past three days. The bruising is mostly gone yet puncture Remains. Still the same width, but with no welts save for a several small black tendril flourishes.

Before I can touch it myself, Solas’s cool fingertips hover and then plant on top of what I’d now consider a spot, not an injury. Having spent time with Favrun, I find that cooler body temperatures seem to be an elven trait. Yet, Solas feels unnaturally so. I expect it’s due to magic and his wield of it.

While the sensation begins far rougher than I remember it being, the wriggling of snakes or worms begins to fill my chest and I’m reminded of the several times he had done so before. I do my best relax and allow Solas to attempt whatever it is that he is attempting.

Tempering each breath, I look over to the windows as the shifting sensation of… searching? Grasping? Begins to travel to a place within that is not connected to organic parts. This is uncomfortable not in terms of pain, but the hind brain warns of this invasion. If Solas is searching for something, I have nothing to hide despite not knowing what he seeks. Yet… perhaps I should worry; with how superstitious these people are, my jokes about witch trials could become the prediction of my own demise.

I focus on raucous laughter belonging to an unknown group of women and men out and below. A cool breeze eases inside the tower to usher in the first of evening’s coolness. Just as it begins to brush against my face and neck, a small metal ring tolls out. Blinking, I turn back to Solas. His eyes are closed and he makes no motion as another sound, like a metal bearing tapping against glass bounces again.

Rapid eye movement flickers against the the soft skin of his lids. Taking in how the freckles dust his
pointed nose and hard bones. Lines settle into the corners of his eyes and underneath them and in the corners of his cheeks. I had not often seen him smile, so I wonder when he had earned those... He bears the looks of someone in his late forties to early fifties.

It irks, I find, that I don’t know his age; or anyone else's, for that matter. How old was he? How old were any of the elves? The dwarves? The Qunari? The other Humans? My experience with fantastical pointed ears had been with reading Tolkien, and those elves lasted millennia. Could this man really be a few thousand years old? If he is, I wonder what he looks like underneath a microscope. Or what kind of genome could halt organic material from breaking down over centuries.

His intake of breath is slow, deep, heavily focused. I take in the dimple in his chin and of the carve in his forehead, noting how they almost align. As each restless second spent staring into Solas’ face, the grasping shifts into something new, like that of being pushed... or pushing. My shoulders hunch to tense but I fight to maintain a loose limber; when the third metallic chime sounds, there is a push that bubbles and I am reminded of the Hunger...

Solas’ mouth parts in a soft gasp.

Another small, metal ‘tink’, yet louder this time. It is strange that I cannot get a sense of the direction, yet can almost feel what is causing the chiming noise. It tapers now, echoing into a soft ring. Solas’ tipped ears shiver from the pitch. The pushing shifts into grasping, grabbing at what? And where? Why can I feel this place of... unknown? Outside of body...

It is when those tendrils try to wrap around ‘everything’ that I imagine that I am able to push back. But perhaps I imagine too hard.

A bone-shaking bass slams down, drowning the metallic chime. The resound is short lived, but akin to the banging of a drum larger than the circumference of this room. The difference of volume and sensation so startling that we each gasp. What I assume to be Solas’ magic rips itself from my chest instead of slithering as it had in the past.

Nauseatingly unpleasant is the kindest way to describe the experience as I stumble two steps back, nearly gagging. Above, from the library, faint confused voices flutter down.

Solas’ eyes are open, wide, and shocked. It is not an expression that looks at home on someone so calculating.

“Sorry,” I say, stooping to lift the crate. Before anymore can be said, I dart for what looks to be the exit.

The weight of his eyes are upon me as I exit the rotunda, even remaining in distance.

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Chapter End Notes

Alright! Shorter, mild chapter with some weirdness at the end. I will eventually be straight with y'all, but that day is not today.

We at least know what she has in her mountaineering pack, how her phone is staying charged, and that she's becoming a person with a dry and morbid sense of humor again.
So - to make note of it; no one except for Andra knows that she's from a different world/place yet, just that she's very foreign. Solas is beginning to suspect the 'how and where' of her circumstance, but I don't think it realistic to assume someone who's different in looks/language/culture is from another planet straight away. I've never read Solas' focus as one that was Cosmic, just between the Fade and Thedas. Going for the "Outside-Context Problem" trope pretty hard for this one because it's... fun to genre blend.

As penance for it being a slow burn, I do hope that you notice and enjoy the small moments of them checking each other out.
Log - Day 52

It has taken nearly a month to get access to a syllabary.

Of all the times to start learning - in the wilderness with four men who could very likely cause great harm.

Christ.

This IS madness.

The black ocean dream fades, as calm, consistent, and unintelligible as I'd grown to expect it to be.

What I don't expect is a firm grip upon my shoulder that rouses me from the first sound sleep in days. So deep, it takes a solid minute to understand that there is, indeed, a person looming just at the bedside. The room is dark save for one low-burning sconce above the entryway. The rest of the eleven women remain asleep. Blinking past the figure, the sky just outside is a fine indigo pitch. Their two moons shine low along the horizon. The has sun not yet risen, and is at least an hour or so away from doing so.

Why so damnedly early?

With so many still sleeping, to groan aloud would be obnoxious. I settle for a sigh and sit up, the straw scratching my bare legs, the thin wool blanket covering them no better.

“You’re to leave with the Inquisitor this morning.” the person, distinctly male and elven, straightens upright. Candle light flickers off the metal breastplate they wear, shadows too dark to make out their face.

“Wakey-wakey, Princess,” a smug, well-intending, dwarven voice filters in from the hallway, sobering the remaining grogginess.

“Varric?” My throat feels dry as I swing my feet over the bed, the cobble a cold jolt underfoot. Wearing just a tunic and small clothes, I pause in standing for the guard to leave.

“None other,” Varric’s stout silhouette stands just beyond the doorway. Alongside him is another guard.

“Go?” I clench my jaw after speaking, unsure of how to fully string together a sentence but showing that I understood what was needed. “Mahanon,” I say to further clarify.

“That’s right, Chops wanted us down at the stables five minutes ago.”

A nod is given, not in understanding but to show readiness. The guard, sensing reservation with him so near, moves to stand outside with the rest. After a stumble in the dark and a change of clothes, I slip on my boots and recognize new ones would be needed, and soon. A scoff reaches me as I move to the room’s basin to splash water on my face and take some to gargle. It's promptly ignored as I tie
off my hair. I will not regret spending most of last night in the bath house, shedding dirt and stress. Nor will I regret sparing a moment now.

I spit the gargle into a chamber pot, the pungent scent of urine a firm reminder that this day is not starting off well.

The lack of fresh, clean water may be been a novelty to some mountaineers... But now it only leaves me frustrated and consistently grimy. I’d been no stranger of the concept “to shit in the woods”, yet had always expected to return from the mountains and forests to bathrooms dressed in porcelain.

The clearing of a throat startles me from the memories of washing in delicate sinks. A variety of things are tossed my satchel; including what was already packed, journal, phone, solar pack, and the book Solas placed in my care yesterday. I hadn’t opened it until I was settling into sleep the night before; to my surprise, it is an introduction on Trade language, complete with what looks to be a syllabary.

I yet need a phonetic comparison with English, but it was a god damned start.

“Okay” quietly said amongst them now.

Varric gives a pleased nod as he begins to saunter down the hallway, his heels scratching against the floor with each step. Now, with the barest hint of dawn’s promise, I see that he’s completely outfitted- his intricate crossbow secure against his back, a pack slung over his broad shoulders.

The walk is silent but I want to confirm that we’re going back from whence Idrilla and I came, for precaution’s sake. “Go... Arbor trees?” the words are fumbling - I couldn’t remember the right word for forest or the other term they called... Arbor something. It earns me several sniggers.

“Arbor Wilds,” Varric confirms. “Chops wants to see what you did when you were there. He also told me what you did with a piece of Lyrium. Red lyrium” The way he says the last two words come off incredibly grave and I see the corners of his eyes give me a sidelong stare. “You know, that stuff is incredibly dangerous shit.”

“Dangerous shit,” I repeat, poorly, but confident in the meaning of the later of the two words. He chuckles and I find myself glad he at least has a sense of humor.

As we descend the stone stairs, the elven guards and Varric move far more gracefully than I. I wonder if their anatomy allows them to see better in the dark - given the elves’ large eyes, such a thing wouldn’t be surprising and the dwarves glitter even in the dank of night. The grounds are quiet, still and shrouded - far different from the liveliness of day. Shadows loom from the battlements but beyond them the sky burns brightly with star formations unknown.

It is when we walk towards the stables that I see we may not be making this trek by foot. Four horses of monstrous size and several figures stand around them; their features melt into view as we close the distance: Mahanon, Dorian, and Solas.

“I come bearing the Princess,” Varric makes for a short, stocky horse; not quite a pony but not the full height of the rest. He stifles a yawn as he pulls the satchel from over his shoulder and onto his ride’s saddle.

“It may be early,” Mahanon speaks, mostly to Varric “But the faster we leave, the faster we seal that rift, the faster we figure out what she’s about, the faster we’re back. Shouldn’t take more than two days. Maybe two and a half.” Varric grunts in acknowledgement as he pulls himself astride.
Once situated, Varric clicks his tongue to move towards the hold’s main gate. Tossing a look to the other human, Dorian climbs atop his horse and canters away... Worry settles in.

Four horses. Five people.

It’s been years, seven to be precise, since I had ridden, and the dread of climbing atop one blindly in the dark is chilling. Further resignation builds as Solas’ faint tap rests upon my shoulder, reins in his hands and a muscular, smokey steed by his side. I count myself fortunate that his features are obscured by shadow. Of course I’m to ride with Solas. Who better?

I steel myself and step to mount. In the last two months, my physique had changed - more muscle, less fat. I’m surprised at how much strength has developed as I climb up with far more ease than expected. In comparison to the rest of the folk here, I’m still far thicker and sturdier. While settling into the smooth dip of the saddle, I startle, only slightly, as my leg is lifted from the stirrup to be replaced with another. There’s a brushing against my shin and thigh- before there’s time to react, there is suddenly a Solas in the saddle’s front dip.

He mounted so easily that I failed to register how he had done so. Solas spares one look over his shoulder; here, in dim obscurity, he is attractive in the frightening sense. Harsh angles, eyes a luminous grey. My hands find the bones of his hips with a steady grip to which his lip quirks and a brow lifts.

Nothing is spoken of yesterday’s metal chimes and imaginary bass drum.

Solas’ legs, far longer than mine, coax the horse toward the others at the gate. As the muscular beast begins a trot, my core adheres to the rhythmic gait.

A handful of guards wordlessly observe the departure.

We ride from morning until nightfall, stopping once midday to let the horses rest and water.

Gauging from what I remember of traveling with Idrilla, and by seeing the landmarks that I’d passed once before, we’d be back at the violent scene the next morning. I file the question as to why Idrilla and I hadn’t been allowed horses for later.

Mahanon pulls the group into to an area that Idrilla and I had camped at on our third night - the remains of our campfire carbon black among the dry bladed grass. Solas twists and slides out of the saddle first and I follow too quickly to realize he’s offered his hand for assistance. The glances we exchange are guarded.

With how little he and I interacted throughout the day despite the extreme physical closeness, so much so that the smell of him permeates my senses, the uneasiness about him is difficult to mitigate.

Mahanon let’s the reins of his horse fall to allow it to graze. I survey the surroundings as he and Varric begin to discuss. Within moments, the two walk off in one direction while Solas wordlessly glides into another, leaving Dorian and I alone. Despite having interacted with Dorian little, his charisma is companionable even as a relative stranger.

As I reach out to stroke Solas’ horse in thanks for carrying the both of us, spurts of bright orange seep into my corner vision. Dorian spins fire: sparks sputter forth from his hands as if they were the mouth of a molten river. He makes quick work of a new campfire where the old had been. Each time I witness anyone practicing or performing, I find myself lost in the art of it. Dorian relishes the attention.
“Fond of the flames, dear?” he speaks as he uprights himself. To further display his skill, he flicks his wrist. Out of nothing twirls a flourish of delicately strung flame. They crawl against the air, fizzling out against the fading night sky. He does so again, laughing, likely, at how I stare.

I want to ask a hundred thousand questions, starting with ones such as ‘How are you combusting nothing? How do you control it? Are you igniting oxygen within the air and controlling the path of oxygen molecules? Is it something that requires a type of mental concentration? If so, what does that feel like? How do you access it? Where does it come from? How large can you make the flames? How much effort does that take? Can you combine it with other “magic”? How does other “magic” work? How do you measure someone's capacity for "magic”? Are you aware that there’s some kind of miraculous molecular excitement going on for flames to work that way?’ to name very few.

But here I do not get to indulge in questioning. Instead, I nod sheepishly. His grin widens in earnest and we attempt an exceptionally brief talk. I tell him my last name, Delamarq, and he tells me his, Pavus. I gather from what words he’s using that he’s from a place called Tevinter. I tell him I’m from America. This earns me a strange, long look. He must believe my skills greater than they are as a long string of intricate words flow from him. I stare, blankly at a half dead tree, in attempts to figure out if I understood any of it. I shrug to admit loss and he laughs quietly, moving to sit on a stone not far from the fire.

“We must really get you up to speed, and soon.”

Varric and Mahanon return not much later with two kills. Small furry things that look like a breed of fox. Taking space opposite of Mahanon and in front of the fire, I observe him clean their limp bodies. While it was easy to taken with how different it all is, the similarities are far more unnerving.

For instance - horses. Were they similar enough to recognize them as horses? Of course, but the anatomical differences were enough to notice that they are unlike any breed I’ve known; stockier, shorter heads, larger eyes, massive bodies, strange color markings. And it's not just animals that possess this strange likeness-unlikeness. Most everything here is the same; they had salt and spices and knew how to tan leather and carve wood. Yet the wood they carved was from odd looking pines, the leather from wonky creatures, and the spices all had contrasting undertones.

Even the humans look… different. Somehow. I cannot place it for as much as I’ve tried.

The land of the uncanny valley.

I wonder how strange I look to them; Maybe this is the reason for all the staring.

It takes little time for Mahanon to clean the carcasses, and even less to quarter them and stick them over the fire. The scent is as enticing as unscented gamey meat can be, even on an empty stomach.

What it is most successful at is reminding me how much I miss pizza and curry and schwarma and pho and fresh fruit and orange juice… The long draw from the coppery, bland waterskin does nothing to quench my thirst.

Varric rolls a log next to the fire just behind where I sit, cross-legged, while sifting through my satchel. Upon seeing the borrowed Trade book, I look to Varric with a forming idea. He’s not yet absorbed in writing, just yet, so this is a prime opportunity. Popping open the cap on one of the felt-tipped pens, I open my journal to write out the English alphabet on one page, following the next with Trade’s syllabary. It feels stiff and foreign in my penmanship.

Once complete, I twist to half face him, “Varric?” I say quietly, but earn the attention of him, Dorian, and Mahanon. Regardless, I press on.
I point to the English characters and phonetically sound them out, at least up to ‘E’. I motion then, to the Trade symbols on the next. Varric's expression at first hard in scrutiny before widening in almost immediate comprehension.

“You know, Chops... While you were gone, you could have had Lady Montilyet assign educators. Half the serving folk don’t know how to read. And this one here can’t even speak anything close to a full sentence.” It sounds more like musing that it does questioning. Mahanon doesn’t rise to meet the undersided gaze he receives from Varric.

“She’s one in the midst of the Inquisition. Josephine had other priorities she was assigned to. But, now that Andromeda has our full attention, we’ll give her what's necessary to suit everyone's needs,” Mahanon’s tone is nonchalant as he pokes at the fire with a knife. “She’ll be learning, no matter what, when we get back. Be it in a cell or a library.”

The look that Varric gives Mahanon is incredibly odd - a mix of incredulousness and exasperation. He sighs before he scoots closer.

Varric begins to pronounce the sound of each symbol and as I write the corresponding romanticized English. A profound sense of sincere productiveness fills me for first time since waking on the mountain, as if something finally feels within reach. Varric is slow and patient as I write out each symbol until the very last. Out of everyone, Favrun and Varric had been the most accepting and kind when they had no reason to. I’d find ways to thank them with more than just words eventually.

“Great. Now repeat them,” Varric leans back on the log as he shifts his own stack of paper. He says the first and I follow.

I'm about halfway through the syllabry, squinting in the light of the dim fire, when a burst of soft greenish-yellow light spills over my shoulder. Startled, my head nearly jerks up into a transparent orb. It floats aimlessly as if it were a bloated firefly and I fail in resisting to poke it. The surface ripples at each touch and is pleasantly warm. Solas strides in from the tree bank just to the south, emerging from the shadows in a way that’s distinctly unsettling. He lowers his hand, his palm filled with a dithering trace of the same soft light.

“Thanks, Chuckles. I knew you cared about my work”

Solas responds with a quiet, mirthless laugh as he takes a spot, folding down in the eerily silent way he typically does.

Once I've resisted poking the glowing orb a fourth time, I finish repeating the sounds of each character. Only moderately unsure as to why self-consciousness rears its head in the presence of Solas. Dorian and Mahanon had occupied themselves when Varric and I first began, committing to conversation, so perhaps it’s the weight of a set of eyes. When I look up, we connect gazes to confirm.

“You’ll be charming everyone in no time with a voice like that,” Varric's eyes crinkle in a roguish wink and I am pulled from the mutable stare. I, in return, give Varric a close lipped smile, thankful to have someone else, and something else, to dedicate focus to.

“Thank you, Varric,” I hope that he recognizes my sincerity in tone, as I always do.

“Any time, Princess,”

As I write down the phonetic equivalents for the words I do know of Trade, I’m able to get a semblance of what characters mean what… Not much, messy, but it’s a start. Soon, Solas joins in on
the conversation between Mahanon and Dorian, and I’m left largely alone for the rest of the evening.

Sometimes, I attempt to follow, writing down words they say that I have some semblance of knowing. I do not remember the last time I traveled anywhere with only men. While I largely feel unsafe everywhere here, it is not the kind of unsafe that most women worry about when alone with a group of men. I cast a look at Dorian, the only other human among the group. There is that distinct feeling he is of a particular taste and I would not be one to sate it.

Given the clear sky, bedrolls are laid out bare. I am thankful for not being crammed inside of a tent with the rest of them - my comfort only going so far. It seems that I am the only one with the actual intention of sleeping immediately as the others remain upright while propped on their bedrolls.

Varric laughs as I slip into something not quite a bedroll; it is the charcoal mummy-style sleeping bag meant for cold weather. The interior lining a yellow so bright it earns his commentary.

“You have the weirdest shit. You know that, right?” His tone is marginally playful. Unsure as to what he’s asks, I slide my hands through the cooling vents to give him a thumbs up. My smirk is hidden at his sudden expression change as he watches my hand disappear back into the sleeping bag. He follows with chuckling as he sets out his bedroll.

It isn't long that the world fades away, the last string of awareness on the thread of hushed whispers.

"Earlier she said she was from America... Have you heard of such a place?"

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**Log - Day 53**

Fell asleep on Solas.

Was firm, smelled good—like pine. He's bald, though.

Embarrassing.

*This* is why I wasn't allowed my own horse.

The morning starts off later than it had the day before. At least dawn is beginning to color the sky, enough to see dim shapes instead of black silhouettes.

Once the horses are saddled, we resume formation. It’s dark, quiet, and no one’s speaking. With the warmth of a body against my front, below, and the horse’s trotting rhythm that rocks back and forth, I only know my eyes have closed during the struggle to open them again.

My cheek presses something both firm and soft. Once blinking, the dim light of morning is now the bright mid-morning melding blue. Mid-yawn, the firm thing I rest against shifts, jerking me into acute awareness.

“Sleep well?” Solas quirks a brow over his shoulder, the one I had just lifted my cheek from.

The shoulder I fell asleep on.

Mortification washes over as I find I’m unable to move into a fully upright position; the unusual warmth of his palm grips at my wrists, crossed at the front of his waist, likely as a precaution in case I were to slip off the saddle given the obliviousness.
“Ugh, this wasn't intentional, I'm sorry,” is slurred in English before committing to a singular “Sorry,” in Trade. While I am not one to flush at romantic entanglements, the same cannot be said in the face of my own stupidity.

Mahanon chuckling off to the right does not help the heat of said embarrassment - nor does the intensely watchful eye of Solas. He finally hums in response and gazes forward. My arms released moments later.

What remains is silent shame and a clear view of the back of his bald head.

“You were the picture of comfort. It would have been a crime to rouse you,” Dorian attempts to assuage though I’ve no way to tell him it only intensifies the embarrassment.

“Solas, too, looked, dare I say it, content with a maiden's arms around his waist.” Dorian adds, earning a tensing posture from the elf in the front saddle dip “Oh, come now, Solas - you cannot possibly deny the pleasure of being so soundly embraced. Perhaps this is your preference? Maybe your carnal desires are in need of a soft maiden’s touch?”

"My carnal pursuits are not for public discussion,” as Solas speaks, the vibrations of his words are felt through his back and through my chest.

"Well, that wasn't a no," Dorian’s grin is heard through his words.

Varric and Mahanon both burst into raucous laughter, rendering further confusion.
Rusting Helms

Chapter Notes

Mild Gore Warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 10

Rusting Helms

Whatever light mood bought at my expense as fades quickly as it had come. Companionable silence bleeds away into one of tension as sheets of grey spread across the horizon, threatening rain. While I expect the same sensations upon returning to these Arbor Wilds, it is unnerving all the same as it creeps, slow and benign at first. Perhaps my expectations magify awareness of it, especially without a life or death situation to be distracted by.

Fortunately, the group breaks the tense silence. Dorian and Mahanon slowly begin an exchange in conversation. The word lyrium is used recurrently and they mention what I think are names… Alexius, Corypheus. The manner in which ‘Corypheus’ is uttered makes their mouths scowl in heavy bitterness. A rival of a kind?

Their pace is slow and clear, denoting that they’ve got handles on public-speaking. Easier for me to follow since these men prove far more enlightening than listening in the kitchens or even to Idrilla. Entertaining, too, as each sentence rife with drama. Almost like listening to an audio book or watching a movie. I don’t remember being so grim as half of my world burned.

Coping is far easier with absurdist fatalism, after all.

“If this isn’t just a wild chase... if we can find a way to purify Lyrium, how effective would that be against Corypheus? Seems to be his favored weapon.” Mahanon stares surely ahead as his Seal Bay hops over a series of stones. He often leads the group, a pace that must come naturally to him.

“To wholly negate the effects of Blighted lyrium... Well, it’s not a known feat. What I am quite positive of is that, given how plentiful red lyrium is of late, that research could, and likely is, flourishing in Tevinter. If any place. I could reach out to contacts, gather some opinions. If this is different, if she truly effects it in some way, there is always the chance to replicate it.”

Solas’s head turns sharply towards Dorian, his already stiff spine rigid in what I assume to be annoyance as he maneuvers the smokey dapple around a dip in the ground. The pace of his voice is calm, yet warning “To advertise this would be, above all else, unwise. I advise against spreading rumor in light of our own ignorance. It will only invite disorder.”

“I’m with Chuckles on this one. Do you have any idea what would happen if the Carta and the Guild found out that something could render lyrium pure? Even if it’s just a rumor? I’m here hoping it was a fluke or that she’s just colorblind. If not, we might as well hang a target around her neck right now,” Varric shakes his head as he dips in the conversation, tossing a speculative look first at Solas and then we meet. “Sorry, Princess.” he apologizes and I shrug, really not knowing why he
felt the need. I’m used to being spoken about and not to at this point.

“Why are we even out here wasting time then? If she can work lyrium back to purity and banish demons with ease, why wouldn’t we at least see if it were true? It’s why we brought her with us in closing the rifts. For us to know, to see.” Mahanon’s tone is curt, his leather clad arms flexing as he looks back at Solas with furrowed brows. “To the void with us if we’d let someone with that skill roll dough in the kitchens instead of being utilized proper,” He shifts sights to Varric who’s already frowning.

“Does she look like someone who regularly joins inquisitions to you? What if she’s just got higher tolerance to red lyrium and we slowly drive her mad by making her work it?” Varric seems to be reasoning. “What if she IS some kind of nobility, beyond the borders of Thedas, and her house comes to collect?”

“She wouldn’t have been in the mountains if she were nobility. Leiliana sought these past two months for anything - her name, her looks, the strange stock she carries, those maps. Even Iron Bull tapped into some resources at my request. All nothing. It’s as if she didn’t exist. She’s a blank slate and, as I see it, is a ward to the Inquisition. Which means she will do as ordered - just like everyone else,” something about Mahanon’s tone causes Solas and Varric to shift in their saddles. Solas sighs heavily despite his soft voice. He smooths his palm over the dome of his head before sliding it down to brace the back of his neck. Composing himself quickly after, his hand drops back into his lap. The only tell of his irritation from behind is that his ears lay flat against the sides his skull, flickering.

“Chops, are you aware of the definition of obstinate?” Varric laughs not in kindness but a sort of resignation.

“I am and always aim to be,” Mahanon leans back in his saddle, a disarming smile full of sharp teeth.

The conversation dithers at what sounds like a difference of opinion. I am left with nothing to focus on save for the Hunger that has, in full, rebounded. If I cannot resist, I will allow it to build freely. At least in hopes of understanding why I am reacting. In doing so; the first thing I realize is it pangs from that space beyond my parts, beyond my consciousness. A sense that is new... yet, not. As I remember how it felt to have something reach inside the day before yesterday, I attempt to imagine a stopper. If I had been able to push back, or imagine doing so, could I imagine a wall to cease this feeling, too?

The moments pass, stretching longer than moments should, I fail to do so. In fact, it feels as if I incentivize it. The Hunger surges like that of an incoming tide. We are at the apex of the hill now and I clutch at my thighs for grounding, wishing they would banter so that I could think of anything else. At the clearing of his throat, I look over to Dorian, his eyes shifting as if listening to a sound I cannot hear. I wonder if they, too, are affected by this. If they are, then why am I so weak to it.

“I’m not imagining… whatever that is, am I?” I watch Dorian as he speaks; his lower lip has the tendency to pout outwards when he frowns.

“No,” Solas tosses a look over his shoulder “you are not.”

I drink, deeply, from water skin until there’s nothing left. It is frightening how eager I am to focus on the dead for distraction- had it been this insufferable a few days ago? Had I been so frightened I hadn’t noticed? Am I frightened now? I pinch the bridge of my nose for a moment, hard, to see if that brings me a sense of calm. It doesn’t.
“Another must have opened,” Mahanon’s tone is somber as his hand crackles against his clutch of the reins. His posture straightens in alert, tendrils of black hair lap at his shoulders and neck, the rest tied in a plait. While although a strange man, he wields the visage of a leader well when not smiling or heckling, “Is that where you found them…?” he gestures to a part of the forest further to the West.

Following his pointed hand, I correct it by extending my own directed at the treeline. Mahanon lifts a brow as he surveys the forest once more before edescending down the hill in a slow trot.

In the gentle descent, I shut my eyes and even my breathing, thinking of candles, of trees, of pencils, cars, dogs, planes, clouds- anything to try to ignore the feeling. Solas speaks my name, peering over his shoulder. His expression dangerously blank and grey eyes the same dire shade as the clouds above. I bore back, silent and frowning.

Our gaze is broken as the treeline looms near and I dig my nails into my thighs to provide better distraction. Submitting to this feeling was not one of my brighter ideas. I, clearly, have no idea what I’m doing.

Accepted into Berkeley's Astrophysics doctoral program and I've no idea what I’m doing.

I have no idea what I’m doing.

“You okay, Princess?” Varric is only an arm’s length astride his horse, yet his voice is far distant.

I nod, earning skeptical stares from the lot. “Just wonderful. I love being the unspoken accessory regarded only with sides of cryptic condescension.” I pause at the sound of my own voice, how weak it sounds from lack of use. Both Solas and Varric eye me and then each other before looking to Mahanon.

“Maybe we should… leave her here or something. Better yet, let’s just bring her back to Skyhold and pretend this never happened. I’ll have you know bread is incredibly important to the Inquisition.” Varric reasons, first with worry, then with humor to cover it.

“I know you have a softness for strange and wayward things, but we must at least seal the rift and tend for the dead.” Mahanon resolves, not looking back.

Silence falls over the group just at the threshold of the forest begins to beckon with the scent of freshly decomposing flesh. Sharp and disarming. The rest of the men seem unaffected. I find no shame in covering my nose with a scrap of linen from my waist pouch. When the horses grow skittish, Mahanon pulls to a stop. After dismounting and tying down the reins, the group moves forward on foot. I can see where Idrilla and I ran through, vines and undergrowth torn. The imprints of our soles spread wide into the mossy forest floor.

It takes a few minutes to move to the clearing ahead. Decay pierces even the cloth. I press it tightly to my nose and mouth, wincing but not only from the smell but the memories of it. What is more alarming is despite being surrounded by the dead is how compelling the Hunger is, willing towards the opposite side of the clearing. Disarming how my legs dare to skirt away from the group. I struggle against it.

If only I knew the purpose for this confusion and madness.

As we break into the clearing, the group spreads out. I edge towards a fallen monster, what they call ted templars. Not mutants or monsters. Just templars that are red and horribly disfigured - I still do not understand what causes this change as it was explained to me, poorly, by Favrun.
The air is thick. Drifting through the balm of rot, I use the tip of my boot to tilt the head of one of the fallen monster templars over. How I am calm, I do not know. Somehow I manage, or maybe just actively repressing as I experience.

The templar at my feet was one who wore leathers. A portion of its skull is missing and I see that the red stones grow even inside the cranium. If that wasn’t strange enough, they show almost no signs of decomposition, even early stages. The elves look to be well into bloat; their long, thin bodies swelling. A natural process despite their unnatural end.

What the red templars do possess, however, is an abundance of those red stones, sprouting across every patch of bare skin. A fungus, then?

“Oh, don’t touch - My, what did you do to their heads?” I try to roll the Templar over using only my foot but am intercepted by Dorian who surveys the rest of them. A silk handkerchief is in his hand, only having covered his nose moments ago. A small relief that I am not alone in this. Dorian still wears that look that most do; the one when they are highly suspect of something amiss but, for the life of them, cannot fathom what it is.

Do they experience this strange Hunger?

Ham-fisting the question is an option. I’ve considered this, yet something tells me it wouldn’t over well if I were to ask if they were hungry. Given that we literally stand in the beginnings of a mass grave. Smell that? Doesn’t it make your mouth water? No? Just me?

“Likely that gun thing; she’s a good aim. We’ve got to deal with this first. I’m surprised more haven’t been possessed, if any of them.” Mahanon answers Dorian through gritted teeth as he lifts an elven corpse to drag it away from one of the templar bodies. He’s pulled on gloves in the process, thank god.

The contrasting bodies between the slain and the templars is one I am unable to explain and will be unable to avoid thinking about. Once Mahanon places the body down, facing towards the sky, he commits to grabbing another. He begins to line them as the rest of us watch in silence for a few moments.

“We can’t leave them. You know the risks.” his voice layers with a dull, sad anger as he lays the body of a woman down with a surprising gentleness. Her eyes are stuck in a milky stare, her skin yellowing and lips blackened. She is puffy from bloat, as are the rest of them. Mahanon picks two dark stones from the ground to lay them over her gaping eyelids. Strange that such a ritual exists here, too.

The only sound in the area is the shuffling of bodies and the grunts of those who struggle to lift them. For a large military force, I find it odd that the five of us commit to this act alone, especially when these men seem to be important and administrative in various ways.

Unsure of how I’d lift the heavier ones, I bite my lip and look to smaller, sagging forms; most of the children were in pieces. My head swims at the sight of a lone leg wrapped in a delicate linen legging. Mahanon pauses in the corner of my eye - and in my frozen state I expect rebuke for not moving immediately to help. I am grateful it never comes.

I run my hand over my face - gathering the steel and struggling against the pull to move towards the treeline. Taking several moments more to work the nerve, I pull on a pair of leather gloves. I lift the body of what looks to be a little girl and stamp away any memories of before, viciously and staunchly aware that emotional weakness in this moment is not warranted. I bite the inside of my cheek, hard enough to taste copper, as I lay her down at the end. I hold my breath through picking up
each consecutive child.

As this continues, with each small sad shell, five of them at this point, these damned legs veer closer to the edge that those monstrous things appeared. Past the tree line, past the burnt wagons and dead goat-elk and into the thickness of the forest. I’ve lost the struggle.

There are two parts - myself and that space beyond, where this Hunger burns. I imagine what this sensation might look like, an invisible siphoning maw aching as it draws towards a need. To experience such a polarization of emotion and strained consciousness, I question if this is it: the precipice of insanity.

It is not long before I hear my name called, in demand and distress. I want to cry back, to Varric, to Dorian, even to Mahanon or Solas. But that want pales in comparison to the other.

Another clearing isn’t far off - that same harlequin green that taints the sky glows ahead. It’s a pure shade until disturbed by two hulking towers that tread calmly. Shimmering obelisks of blackened points. As they meld into view, their outline firms into nothing but sharp edges, points, and terror. More monsters. Seven, eight feet tall? My head cranes back as I reach for them.

When they move forward, their strides are even and as long as I am tall. The ground shakes underneath their invisible weight. Cloaks of pitch whirl around them in smoking wisps. Despite being nightmarish wraiths, they are visions of precise confidence. The one closest flourishes its weapon and shield, it’s armor keening in protest to movement as it drives an oily longsword into the ground. With a stiff thump, it falls to one knee. Underneath its helmet of sharpened flares is a pair of eyes that burn with heightened awareness.

A yell to stop rings from behind as I reach inside the creature’s blackened helm, fingers nearly bursting in need. Light erupts the moment I touch what feels like bone and metal. I am granted that explosive, overwhelming relief.

I am blinded and so very, very content.

The cries of the group are louder now, but I can’t find myself to stop as the other armored goliath yet remains. It kneels too, sword shunted into the dirt and head bowed. The same red eyes pour out from behind its visor like molten stones. As the first, and as before, light erupts from the connection.

However, as the light fades the Hunger remains. Desperation tells me to gather any semblance of senses. Clamoring metal and bones shudder to the ground as the two armored giants shift and shudder apart at the seams. The first already lays in a strewn heap, bones jutting out of the armor in odd ways. The second figure’s helmet remains in my hands, flecks of rust rough under my palms. A skull drops out the bottom as the rest of the body sinks in lost form.

Despite the crumpling wraiths, all I can bear to look towards is that green light. A window? A door? A gate.

These legs start to move again, towards that light until a violent grip rips me around. I stumble into Mahanon’s shoulder - his face twisted and lined with rage and perplexion as he scans the fallen automatons. And then up, the green glow reflected in the spans of his eyes.

“Close the rift,” someone bites out in restrained anger “Now!”

A hand grasps the back of my neck as Mahanon bolts in the direction of the light, leaping over the forest floor as if he were made of wind and not flesh. Dorian, with a staff drawn, follows like lightning. Somehow, the fingers that clamp at my neck bring a sense of clarity as well as pain. As I
look again, the green light is several hundred feet away, half obscured by distance and the shadows of the forest’s canopy. I could have sworn it was only a few steps…

Mahanon, once near, stretches his magical palm far above his head. A tendril connects him to the larger light. It slams out of existence with such force a shock wave peels through the trees, sending him stumbling backwards. Dorian assists him upright.

The rush of wind and electricity crackle as it connects and I gasp at the wash of it.

Once that light is snuffed - that space beyond my parts becomes an unknown, empty place - aching, true relief. I draw in a breath as the helmet in my hands slips, clanging to the ground against the second shifting bone and armor pile. Varric comes to stand in my line of vision. I twist, only slightly, to see Solas standing behind me. Despite how his nails sink into my skin, it is something else that holds his attention.

Several feet off are two figures. They stand against the trees of the forest and do not belong in the way I feel I do not belong. These figures, unlike the two from days ago, seem… more put together; easier to make out. As I regain what few bearings I have, I take in that they appear elven: tall with pointed ears. Ethereal. Their bodies are still somewhat transparent, trees and verdant green coloring their silhouettes.

In the next few moments, Solas rolls those lulling, intricate words that are not Trade in a taut tone. Faster, cleaner, better than Idrilla had spoken. Still, despite underlying anger, he maintains politeness. Somehow, it sounds as if he is successful. The glowing figures respond in kind, their voices warbling soft. The space around them shifts, like the most minute scale of gravitational lensing I’ve ever seen.

Mahanon and Dorian return with a slow jog. Mahanon first stares at his palm before he, too, gapes at the mess and then the apparitions.

“What are they saying?” Varric presses, face pale despite his lively tan complexion.

“A moment, please,” Solas’ voice hitches in a faint, almost pained way. Perhaps he is not accustomed to confusion? I could give him pointers. Solas slips back into the other tongue; his native language? It pours from him far more naturally than Trade. As the figures speak, I attempt to duck out of his grasp to prove my lucidity. All this succeeds is his grip to tighten to one that is near bruising. I try not to wince.

The conversation lilts a few more strings until Solas exhales a rush of air, his hand releasing my neck only to sweep across the dome of his head. The other plants itself on his hip and he turns away as if someone had slapped him.

The first apparition to have changed has slid within an arm’s length, bending its tall body in a slight bow. Stunned, all I can do is watch as it straightens itself upright. In its chest small flecks of dust illuminate within themselves; contained inside of a translucent membrane?

It is too much to resist; I reach out to feel its arm. I am both surprised and not as my fingers pass through it - confirming its incorporeal form. I take to poking it slightly, each time my fingers passing drifting through as if the thing were a scrap fabric floating on a cool, liquid surface.

The clearing of a throat, Dorian’s maybe, hints that I should cease. I step back to observe the rest of it; it stands motionless, head tilted downwards. Given that it has no definable irises or pupils, I cannot see its stare but feel the mesmerizing weight of it. It dips his head in another gesture and while it possesses a mouth, it does not move as it speaks.
“Da’banal’ras tara sasha. Lin laim.” it extends a diaphanous hand, fingers like spindles wafting against my forehead. The sensation causes that space beyond my parts, and the whole of me, to shiver in deep, unspoken, unknown sorrow for the barest of moments. It withdraws to extend its palm instead. Unsure, I move to place my own over its in a gesture of good faith. Culturally, I’ve no idea what’s to be expected but this seems like the right option. As our palms graze, it begins to dissipate.

Both do.

The other that stood silently watching speaks just before it dissolves into nothingness.

“Etha mar’lin, Telin’alin. Es’an harth i’tel’eolasa.” With no tone or body language, I can make no guess as to what it meant.

“What did they say? My understanding of ancient Elvhen is not that deep,” the sprawling silence was finally penetrated by Mahanon. His snarl had settled into a pointed sneer. “Is she some kind of demon?” I lock eyes with him - his anger is more than at me, but largely so. I’m able to gather that changing these things is bad.

“She is no demon, Inquisitor,” Solas finally speaks, sounding thoroughly disgusted, and I look at him just in time to catch the roll of his eyes. “But they were corrupt. Desire and Pride. Now, they’ve convalesced back to their baseline; Purpose and Wisdom.”

“They can be switched back just like that?” Varric’s expression opens wide as he begins to sift through the armor, pulling out jewelry and other items. Furrowing my brows, I ponder if right now is the best time to loot a monster’s corpse. I see the others pay him no mind so I bend grab an ornate embroidered pouch from the second armor. Not interested in the contents much for myself, I side step to Varric, gently bumping it against his shoulder to gather his attention. I am accustomed to the strange looks he gives me and I nod to him as he finally takes it. Solas watches the exchange with tight lips before continuing.

“No, they do not often revert back with such ease, nor are they typically aware for it. Such as we fought the Revenant in the Fallow Mire, you’ve seen that it requires the destruction of their vessel to banish them. And how difficult it is to do so,”

“That sound, then? Perhaps that’s it; I don’t think it could be anything else,” Dorian takes silk handkerchief he had used earlier to wipe his brow, stuffing it back in his side pocket. Worry does not suit him.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Varric pulls a necklace from out of the pouch I handed him but looks between Dorian and Solas instead.

“It is unlikely you would being a child of the stone. Given the nearly violent pressure exerted against the veil, and them, I doubt her awareness as well. How it is so constant... How she does not ever tire or reach a limit... I do not understand.” Solas draws near, still pensive and shaken in someway.

“Hadn’t we already decided she wasn’t a mage? You know, able to touch raw lyrium? Immune to smite?” Mahanon also closes in, posture still in offensive.

“No standard civilian can so easily convince a possessed vessel to relinquish their hold, let alone revert them back into their ancient and primary state of being.” Solas pauses as he folds his arms tightly over his chest, his nails digging into his upper arms as they had my neck. With his gaze cast at the ground, he continues. “Andromeda is capable of magic in some way. I sought for her magical
center the day of our return. I am certain it is there, however hidden. Witnessing this only solidifies that.”

“Was that... In the Rotunda?” Dorian asks as Varric passes him the necklace he just unearthed.

“Yes,” There is a pause in Solas’ reply “Upon her return, the vibrations against the veil were distorted. As it is now. And so I made yet another attempt was made to sense a connection... It was, in a way, successful.”

Whatever this means, it incenses something in the shorter elf.

“For what your infinite wisdom is worth, you didn’t think to inform me?” Mahanon’s eyes narrow to slits as a rivalry between them lay bare. Solas straightens his back to his full height, head tilting as his own eyes widen at what I assume must have been an insult. The sharp angle of his jaw clenches before he opens his mouth.

“Given the aversion of spirits and her obscurity in the Fade, I did not believe it a major risk. Is it so wrong to observe first instead of leaping head on into poorly made decisions?”

The snort of contempt signals the abrupt end of their sudden escalation; Mahanon throws one arm into the air, stomping north “Happy now that you’ve gotten a little look? Let’s get back, we’ve bodies to burn,” His black braid sways with every heavy tread of his boot.

It takes an hour after the heated situation to dissolve into one of bizarre unease. The rest quietly organizing the remains of the dead. Solas took to crafting a barricade of snow and water around the bodies while Dorian consumed them in fire - a massive cremation. Varric stands close as if I were about to run off again. If only I could laugh and tell him not to worry, that if I had a choice, I would have stayed in Skyhold. Away from death and demons and angry elven men. Men were typically things I’ve always stayed away from. Yet, here I am.

“Sorry,” I apologize in Trade, at a loss of what else to say.

“You know, this would be a lot easier if you spoke anything recognizable. Or if we knew where you were from. I’d be thrilled if you spoke Qunlat at this point.” He does not look to me but instead folds his thick arms over his chest, the grit of dirt under his boots. The flames of the bodies reflect in his eyes, the light flickering over his broad features. For the first time, Varric looks older than I first assumed him to be. “You made your life a hell of a lot more complicated,” it is a world weary look that he wears, one that I know well.

Though, I think we wear it differently.

It takes several hours for the flames to reduce the bodies down into an unrecognizable ash, the scent of it an additional memory of char and ash. More magic is cast to bring down the flames. Before preparing to leave, Mahanon picks a satchel from the ruined wagons and begins to stuff it with the red stones. Once finished, he ties it shut, jutting it to me for holding. As I slide it over my shoulder with my other pack, he peels off his gloves to toss them into what little remains of the burning embers.

We camp at the outskirts of the forest that night but I cannot sleep. Not with the smell of bodies burning so close by. Keep it together. Not with being so close by and experiencing... shape shifting spirits. Keep it together is what I tell myself.

I realize now that’s what Solas meant; those are their fifth kind of people.
When the morning comes, we immediately set off, again stopping only once to rest and water the horses. It’s well into the night upon our return. Skyhold filled with the same shadows and quiet as it had been when we left two days ago.

Had it really been only a week since I first left the keep?

Pulling up to the stables, each start to dismount. This time, I take Solas’ offered hand. His skin is unusually warm for once, the beat of his heart felt through the palm of his hand. The drop shocks the balls of my feet, my inner thighs aching from straddling both the backside of a man and a horse. A guard or assistant begins to collect the rides, drawing them into the darkened corrals. Mahanon, after sparing a few hushed moments with the guards that met us at the gates, approaches with his hand extended for the satchel. I offer it freely.

Dorian, Solas, and Varric watch as he unties the leather straps.

A singular dry laugh escapes him as the soft glow of azure fans across his features - his sharp teeth illuminated.

“Andraste’s tits,” Varric has the long, lost look of defeat as he runs his palm over his mouth, clapping his jaw at the sight of the blue lyrium. He shakes his head, turning away from the stables and starts making his way to the hold without another word.

It is not long before I am escorted back to my bed by a guard, as well. Despite that it should come easy considering my fatigue, sleep is several hours off.

I am unable to rid my mind of the smell of burning flesh and the space that lies beyond my parts.

Chapter End Notes

Elvhen taken and mashed from FenxShiral!

Little void stands alone. A thing lost.

"Da’banal’ras tara sasha. Lin laim."

Protect yourself, strange thing. They hear without knowing.

"Etha mar’lin, Telin’alin. Es’an harth i’tel colasa."
**Quantum Theory**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Log - Day 53**

Back in Skyhold.

Something is exceptionally wrong. With me.

A kind of biological magnetism?

This is outside of any previous experience in so many ways.

What was that green light? (various chemical reactions, all not good) Radium? Simple phosphorescence?

Similar to the cloud formations above the mountains.

What did those spirit things say?

The last shreds of dream are of that glowing sphere and of the expanse of the endless rolling black waves... even after all this, the dream remains constant and comforting. Still just as eerie.

As that black ocean grows dormant, hushed whispers rouse me from the second deepest sleep this week.

“*Oh, you’re awake!*” someone meekly exclaims as I sit upright. Deep within each thigh is a tremendous ache; never before have I been thankful for a mattress filled with straw.

In my recovery, I squint in the direction of the voice. Two women, one elven and the other human, sit opposite each other several beds down. Upon regarding them, they exchange looks with one another before the meek voice, the elven woman, speaks.

“*Lady Andromeda, is it? We don’t mean harm in asking,*” the elf asks as she fiddles with her hands. While I’ve seen this woman in passing before, we’ve not spoken directly. Now that I see her still and sitting, she is so incredibly small, her wrists like twigs. Being a medieval era in perpetuity, in addition to… war or whatever these people face, emaciation is common. It shows in her gaunt cheeks and in the circles underneath her eyes. It even makes her pointed ears seem larger. A small twinge of guilt takes me as I look over my own legs; healthy and unscarred.

“*Do you cast before you sleep? Or is it those sigils you write in that book o’ yours? I’ve never seen you cast anything, so we’ve been wondering how you do it.*” the human woman finishes for the elf, her voice fast and desperate. It is not the large question that’s taken me aback, it’s that they’re speaking to me. *Looking* at me.

The human is the same as the elf: underfed and with a head of thin dark hair and even darker bags under her eyes. They have open and honest look, albeit frightened. It appears they’ve just been
discussing something quietly betwixt themselves.

“Sorry. No Trade,” I shrug while shaking my head as both fade to a crestfallen expression. A pregnant pause passes and I begin to throw my legs over the bed, not wanting to push conversation with them if they weren’t ready. I’m confident in my inability to hold one, anyway.

“We… we wanted to say that we’re glad you’re back since you keep the Fade so quiet. I’m not sure if you’ve heard about what happened at Kirkwall a while back. We were there and… it’s been difficult to find solace in sleep.” the elven woman speaks quickly, nervous and with a piercing stare that I shift underneath. “What I’m saying is that we don’t have nightmares when you’re here. Thank you.”

“Most welcome,” the response Favrun had taught in the past few weeks seemed apt after having heard the word ‘thank you’. The women exchange looks, the elf pouting and the human raising a brow before they fall back into quiet conversation with one another. Staring out the door, it’s only just the break of morning. The sky clear but a heavy wind whistling against the stones of the battlement to create a long, lonely wail.

In the turmoil of this last week, there’d been no time to decompress until now; my time was no longer my own currency.

However, maintaining a pliant, neutral attitude seems imperative to survival.

Wiggling into the smoke stained leather leggings, each thought begins to grow more concrete than the last. The most imperative goal is to learn; to understand more of this place and its language. So that I do not feel so much of an object and can regain some autonomy. So I can start asking how, why, what rather than stating ‘I don’t know.’

Not having the energy to wash all of myself the night before, I bend to pull my crate of belongings from underneath my bed. After ruffling, I pull out a bar of almond soap, half gone, and a small tube of perfume, also nearly depleted. Only one set of clothing remains clean; a black tunic and black leather leggings. I stuff them and the toiletries into my satchel.

Turning to the women still conversing, I point to myself. “Andromeda,” and then point to them

“You... Don’t know our names?” The human woman asks.

“Names,” I nod

“Trinde Ginvallen,” the human woman responds before looking to her elven counterpart “I’ve experience in teaching Trade...”

The elven woman, if possible, frowns deeper than before at the human named Trinde. It fades to an expression of pity as she turns back. “I am Malfera Tobiath. I apologize for not sharing this before; we thought you knew...”

“Malfera, Trinde.” I gesture to each of them with another nod whilst stepping through the threshold to hide a wince. “Good bye,”

Introductions. Awkward. Late. A start.

A trek to the communal washroom down near the kitchens is on priority - our return late last night left me too exhausted to do much more than dabble in the basin. There aren’t many awake yet and
the few that are move sluggishly in the crisp air and the sharp wind accompanying. Cutting between a few training dummies, filled with straw and patched poorly, I quickstep it to the servant’s entrance. Less traffic and fewer eyes.

The washroom is on the opposite side of the hold on the second to lowest level accessible by staff. Small aqueducts line the floors adjacent to the walls to bleed excess water down and out the side of the mountain - a surprisingly intelligent design feature by means of harnessing its natural weight.

It is often filled to capacity in the evenings which comes as no surprise. The very nature of military was dirty work in all forms, no matter the place.

An older human woman is stationed at the open double doors. Perched on top of a worn, raw wood chair, her nose deep in a thick book with an oddly bright cover. She is a magic user and had grown accustomed to my early morning ritual; she knows of my fondness for water almost scalding. Still engrossed in whatever it is she reads, she taps a wooden stave against the floor. The gem atop it glows a brilliant yellow before it quickly recesses; phenomena I absolutely have to dig my hands into at some point later. The signal that the tub water was ready; I nod and give her thanks. She mumbles in reply.

The walls are just like the rest of the hold; a fine, slate grey, delicately organized in a way that shows the skill of the architect that designed them.

However, despite careful construction, these walls are scummed from the use of what is likely animal fat soaps. Within the small, open stalls are copper and cast iron tubs. Metal basins accompany each, wooden and leather plugs at their bottom for emptying. I learned quickly before that these people had no plumbing; the water all carried from wells dug just outside the keep. To save on water, I’ve taken to washing outside of the tub, by hand, before soaking.

Unsure of what this day will bring and pondering all the more for it, I set to the task quickly - scrubbing the surface-level grime with a linen cloth, brushing my teeth with my soon to be thread-bare toothbrush, and utilizing my hunting knife to shave what I could of my underarms and legs.

I’ve asked myself more than once if shaving necessary.

It absolutely isn’t, but it is one familiar comfort.

Once clean, I prepare to step in the tub. Halting, I peer down at my reflection rippling on the surface of the water. Mirrors were only in the main part of the keep and I rarely walk through that gauntlet. Here, this image of me against the water appears the same. A bit thinner but not thin.

With exceptionally dirty hair. Dreadfully frizzy, it also reeks of smoke and possesses a faint putrid smell, likely from being so close to the dead as they burned.

I move to the wash basin to care for it. After vigorous scrubbing and combing through it with my fingers, the desired cleanliness is achieved. Conditioner would be nice, but Favrun’s hair oil does the job in its stead. It being in a constant braid is more than helpful in this environment.

It’s only minutes after I’ve stepped into the tub to soak before the washroom attendant calls out from the room’s entrance. Her voice is soft from age but commanding. “The Inquisitor is requesting your presence.”

Not even enough time to lament or reflect.
"Yes," is all I reply, sighing and letting the back of my head thunk against the rim of the tub. I lost the entire second portion of what she said, but my name and the title ‘Inquisitor’ was heard. Worrisome but expected.

Mahanon is hard to read. Everyone here is, but witnessing Mahanon these past three days was enough to deduce that he was a proficient, and perhaps ruthless, leader. Whatever sensation I experience, and the affect it seems to have on others, is enough to agitate him. Or intrigue; its difficult to tell the difference with him.

Toweling off my sopping mane first, I follow by dressing as efficiently as possible. Instead of wasting the time with a bustier, leather cord as a belt to tie the billowy tunic off. I pull one of two vials of the essential oil, frankincense and amber. I frown at the small amount that remains at the bottom. I try to use it only after I fully bathe. Even so, it isn’t going to last forever. Neither will my soap or the rest of my belongings...

I swathe it over my wrists and neck, massaging it into the skin.

It is when I step out of the wash room’s door that I see two guards. One an elven male in leathers and the other a human male in metal. The metal one has an icon of a sword with small tendrils around it stamped on his chest, just like the red templars. A normal, pre-red mutant, then.

“Inquisitor Lavellan has requested you in the Undercroft,” a human stutters, back stiff and straight, his skin nearly slick with sweat. Despite his height and broadness, he seems too young to be stuffed inside of a breastplate. The thickly wound bun of red hair atop his head doesn’t do him favors, either. The elf, silent, is considerably older. Maybe early fifties? He’s got a thick head of black hair that grazes his shoulders, grey dusting his temples. Wrinkles line his nose and mouth. His eyes are wide across but exceptionally thin. Much like Mahanon and a few other elves, he has a tattoo that curls around his face. Not at all stiff and uncomfortable like the younger human. He, instead, inhales deeply only to then turn to the younger to say “A sweet smelling shem - typically your kind stink. Nice to find that some of you bathe.”

There is an awkward exchange between them, the templar gawking and stumbling over a couple of words as the elf chuckles a bit cruelly.

Finally, the elf shrugs, saying nothing more as the human begins to lead away. The elf extends his hand to signify following. We take the stairs that lead into the main entrance of the massive, vaulted hall. There’s more of a bustle now that the morning had grown; people wearing large, gaudy masks were up and eating pies while sipping on teas. I frown; I missed coffee. Their teas were bland in a way I couldn’t really describe and could, in no way, compare. They also did not seem caffinated.

We come upon a large wooden and metal filigree set of double doors. The armored man, with ease, pushes them both open. In watching the thickness of his neck bulge as his muscles strain, it’s understood why he’s stuffed into those armors.

The room itself was a massive cave with benches and tables carved from the very stone itself. It lead to a massive raw cut balcony that took on a lower view of the mountains outside, light feeding back inside but not enough to fill the space. Flaming sconces line the walls closest to the double set of stairs to make up for it. Dwarves, elves, and a few humans seem hard at work beyond the people that stand in waiting below the first set of steps.

This particular group, several whom I am unfamiliar with, all turn their heads. The nerves double. Among those I do recognize are Mahanon, Dorian, and Solas. Vivienne, a woman I’ve seen only in passing, is also among them. The others, a dwarf woman with red hair, an older elven woman in
robes, an aging human man, and a younger, but sickly, human man stand amongst them.

“Ah, plucked right from the tub, then,” Dorian chuckles to himself before pausing. He breathes in but not as obnoxiously as the elf had. “What oils do you use?”

“Hardly the time, dear,” Vivienne’s voice is like that of a purr.

“Do you not agree that is the exact smell of cake?” Dorian says in rebuttal, his posture a little less straight from exhaustion.

“Whatever it is, it can wait,” Mahanon frowns. Both he and Solas appear the same, expressions dour. They do, however, all look clean from wash. With how heavy the circles of fatigue are under their eyes, I wonder if they had earned any sleep at all.

“Andromeda Delamarq is what she calls herself.” Mahanon says to those who I do not know, nodding before announcing each of the unknowns. The dwarf is Dagna, the young man Felix, the older man Gereon, and the elf is Fiona.

“So, what of our resident waif?” Vivienne outshines every individual in the group. Her dark skin is radiant even in the shadows of this ornate cave. She wears hard, polished leathers of white and her head is sheared to her scalp. “Aside from her gallant efforts after Haven’s fall, I’ve heard only rumors: an untrained circle mage or an escaped slave, the later likely as I’ve been told she speaks little Trade and wanders the grounds with the serving elves,”

“Despite the Inquisitions sprawling networks, we’ve got no houses and no origin. No one knows what she speaks, she hasn’t once attempted to leave the Hold, and most think what Vivienne has just spoke, or that she’s from beyond the The Frozen Seas somehow.” Mahanon’s is voice raspy as if from overuse. “However, at this point, her origins aren’t pressing.” If watch as he unshoulders the bag with the blue lyrium.

“This,” when he opens the bag everyone save Dorian and Solas lift brows “is part of the reason why you, and I, are here this early,”

The older male frowns, deepening wrinkles along his face. I try not to stare at the metal cuffs around his wrists and his neck. “A smuggler, then? You sound like that’s a problem; your lyrium supplies are already diminished due to the conscription of your mages and those struggling templars. One would think you’d enjoy another smuggler.” The tired, worn look Gereon swaths over me and then the others, is fleeting. When he shifts, chains dangle from those bindings.

I turn away so I do not have to see them, my nerves tripling.

“If you’d allow me to finish,” Mahanon snaps, his stature of five and half feet bulging in visible dislike. “Yesterday morning this was blighted lyrium. Red as dragonthorn berries, right from the corpses of red templars. I need the dwarves here to assess it; make sure it’s truly pure. You’re all here for additional assessment of... whatever it is she’s doing, or is. If you can, as magic seems to provide more questions than answers as of late,” Solas’s expression darkens while Dorian rolls his eyes.

Mahanon steels himself, rolling his shoulders to show how unaffected, yet aware, he is of their expressions. “As word is like the wind, I’m sure you’ve heard rumor that clan Rethman’an was attacked. We confirmed it true, just returning from the trek last night. Due to those recent circumstances, we’ve found our resident waif to be of special talents.”
I imagine the statue Winged Victory of Samothrace in hopes of extracting headless confidence as scrutiny from everyone centers upon me.

Teaching ninety eighteen year olds was far easier than the looks from these folks.

“Andromeda emits a sound, a noise, of some kind against the veil, or so Dorian and Solas have described. I want us to find out what it is. To see if we can use it.” Mahanon plants a heavy hand on my shoulder, patting it twice. I do my best to pretend I wasn't startled by the suddenness of it.

“While effects on red lyrium via proximity is indeed worthy of attention, veil resonance is not so uncommon, especially among fade and force mages,” Fiona speaks. She is older; like Favrun, but pale and far more severe in features. Her black hair has grey and white strands littered throughout and her already thin lips are pressed thinner.

“It is if that sound can tame and free demons,” Dorian deadpans as he looks over Fiona. The rest gawk or make strange faces.

“Leiliana’s agent claimed that Andromeda had strange effects on rift-torn demons; changed them. Dorian, Solas, Varric, and myself witnessed the very same effects on two Revenants.” Mahanon supplants, dropping his palm against his thigh.

“Revenants?” Vivienne questions, her long, pointed hand fluttering over her chest in genuine surprise. “Dear, surely you jest. How did she oppose them?”

“She didn’t... Wandered off when we were busy with the bodies of the clan. When we realized her missing, Solas and Dorian were able to follow the sounds against the veil - was a quarter of a mile away when we found her approaching two Revenants. When she moved to touch them, it caused a reaction of some kind - a flash and then suction of light.” Mahanon mimics the majority and also folds his hands over his chest. He wears nothing but a tunic and leather trousers, both pale in color, contrasting with his tan skin and dark hair.

“So this resonance we feel now changes? And you say it never stops?” Gereon, grumpy before, is intrigued now. “How does she not pass out from exhaustion?”

"It remains to be known how it's sustained. When we began to near the sight of the fallen, the noise - the constant hum you hear now - bloomed and rippled out against the veil. We remain unaffected. Spirits... receive an altogether different experience, it would seem. This transaction may offer us answers if we were to observe it further. It is incredibly rare for a spirit, ripped from the Fade and reduced to madness, to return whole and unharmed,” Solas offers a long, and what I assume is thorough, observation on the spirits. We hold gazes for a time - his features set in a cool, placid expression to hide stormy, demanding eyes.

“Do you think it a calling of some kind?” Fiona asks slowly and begins to pull forth several discs of energy. She extends one in my direction and I perhaps misunderstand her reasons for doing so when I move to touch it. She withdraws them before I can, annoyance about her.

“Possibly” Solas observed the interaction, as he did most, with that cold wall of impassiveness “Corrupted spirits that have possessed vessels are seldom young and even less so weak. They spoke in Elvhen and communicated a little of the experience,” Solas cast his eyes to the ground, the skin on his nose pinched from the furrow of his brows. Something bothersome of what he just said, perhaps?

“Well? What is it that they revealed?” Gereon groused, likely because he, too, seems tired.
“The spirit of Purpose is the one that spoke of it as a “memory command forgotten by those long lost, an incomplete, under-formed song. Demands only malformed in return but should be for more’. Spirits, however, are rarely forthright in meaning... Still... Both addressed her... oddly... before transitioning back into the Fade.” His gaze is back up, the pinch still between his brows. I stare back, blinking.

“May I also add that she's a bit daft in the sight of magic? Tried to touch your barrier, yes?” Dorian adds “Always with the touching; she groped and prodded at the spirit as if she was without sense,” Dorian shifts while twining one end of his moustache.

“This would explain why that abomination avoids her like she's walking death, then,” Vivienne laughs while speaking aloud, her eyes flickering against the walls in thought.

“Some of the younger mages have mentioned that the sleep peacefully in her presence. Mentioned that the white noise they hear is like a moving ward.” Fiona supplies quietly.

“It is true; that noise pierces the veil into the Fade in a way I cannot explain. While in sleep, the surrounding Fade is devoid of any spirits that are not explicitly intent in their virtue. I needed to travel a length in the Fade before the sound no longer affected the surrounding spirits.”

“This is tremendous ability with little to no control,” Gereon looks at me now with wide eyes, far more interested. It is not a comfortable gaze.

“A pity she didn’t come with instructions.” Mahanon smirks through a tired laugh, earning several chuckles from everyone. Save for Solas who wears disdain surprisingly well.

I sigh, aware that the joke was my expense. Dagna, the dwarf, had been completely silent but wide eyed with excitement; we had caught one another staring throughout the conversation and I watch as she drifts away from the group.

“If you all don’t mind, I’d like to pull her over here for a bit. Should be fine, right? See if she can answer some of my questions,” her accent is different and her tone is laced with what I think I read as contentment. Mahanon nods and at Dagna’s beckon, I move towards her, cutting around the group as I go.

Now that I have genuine interest in what lies around in this cave, I feel my shoulders broaden, my back straighten - the people in here seemed vested in their actions.

Moving further into the cave I see the manner of work being done - several chemists, or what I assume to be chemists, are hard at work over various cultures and liquids. Some take apart flora to create those poultices that Favrun also makes. It is only slightly troubling that they often lack gloves or protective eyewear. But, I remind myself that they can heal poor eyesight and regrow bone and soft tissue in seconds.

Near the cave’s opening now, I realize how many various studies and professionals are at work; not only are there various biologists and chemists at play, there are craftsmen of leather, cloth, and even a smithy.

“Here we are,” Dagna says aloud, her wide mouth in a bright smile. She has two gold capped teeth on her bottom row. “It’s a real pity that you don’t know much Trade. If you’re stumping all the advisers, it would be great to pick your brain!” she laughs and I offer her a pained half smile, remaining silent. She coughs to ease away the awkward air between us. As she takes a tall stone stool in front of her table, she motions to the other just around the corner. My height makes it far
“It's an arrow into a pit of darkspawn, but... Maybe you show me how these work? Do you know how? I've seen concepts and blueprints of the communication and memory crystals from Tevinter, but this is... something else! It's not pulling from any energy I've traced!” Dagna leans back on the stone stool she perches on and I take in the various piles of trinkets and items and take-aparts strewn over her table. Various tomes and sheets of tanned paper cover the table. It is a relief to see someone of a brilliant, open mind.

The walkie talkies underneath her fingers are completely torn apart. However, they've been peeled in such a delicate way that I no longer worry for their reconstruction, if done carefully. Dagna’s wearing an expectant look, a sheet of parchment held out in her hand, the other hovering over the talkies.

What would a few diagrams and formulas to describe electromagnetism hurt? They likely wouldn't understand, as I'd seen so little scientific approach and more superstition.

Thinking in this way feels like a leather glove, soft and buttery, as I slip into this specific mindset.

It has been... so long.

Too long.

In the next few moments, I draw out rudimentary visual references and equations to explain sound on the electromagnetic spectrum, if just for the practice and nostalgia for my profession.

Once finished, I look up into the severe expression Dagna wears. Her head is cocked, lips quirked in thought, brows pinched in a way that denotes that they rarely are. “Felix, mind coming over here to look at this? Seems right up your alley,” she calls to the younger, sickly man but captures the attention of all of them. What a surprise.

“Yes, Miss Dagna?” he supplants, the only one to bleed away from the group.

“Recognize any of that? She just whipped it out - looks like how these are supposed to work and I’ve seen some of your theorizing. It looks awfully similar,” Dagna passes the sheet to Felix who calmly, gingerly accepts. As Dagna's had, his expression shifts. But far more dramatically... The pit of my stomach clenches as I watch his eyes drift over what I have written on sound and it's interpretation.

He understands.

“She wrote this?” he sounds as if his voice had been stolen.

“Yeah, just a moment ago.”

Felix holds my gaze for a length of time before he bends to write, snatching the felt pen to do so. As I follow his marks, I can see he’s writing a formula. One that I can almost... He finishes, pausing only now to look at my pen he’s just used. Once he seems content, he passes both the parchment and pen back.

His writing is large, not as tight and clean but legible. I nearly gasp, recognizing the patterns in his work.

It a basic attempt to explain sound, not understanding completely how it lied on a spectrum and misunderstanding it’s form. He thought sound a cyclic motion and not a wavelength? I do not
understand all the iconography, but the pattern is there… I can read it!

I place an ‘x’ next to what he’s written and then build up from there, first following with formulas that eventually lead into Planks’ ideas of electromagnetism, show a diagram explaining wavelengths and the seven forms I had known them to come in. Sketching out several diagrams and a couple of drawings to emphasize my meaning before passing it back.

He looks faint as he reads over what I’ve written, placing his palm against his forehead. “Maker preserve me,” Dagna gives him a concerned look, silently waiting for an explanation.

“I… How?” he asks in a pained, pitched tone. In the corner of my eye, a round head with pointed ears turn. I ignore it as Felix begins to write as if his life hangs in the balance. Once he’s done, having filled up an entire sheet of parchment: various formulas, all partially right, all partially misguided in understanding the basic principles of matter and the interpretation of energy. At least they are partially misguided in my understanding… Physics… My fundamental understanding of them had been shaken; while reality here seemed to be... similar, I had at least witnessed some inexplicable phenomena. Things that I could begin to understand, explain... Disprove.

I laugh once, shaking in the shock of being able to… talk.

With math.

In my heavy focus, I’d not realized Solas has drawn near, standing behind where I sit on the stool to observe the writing between Felix and I. While I’m unsurprised he left the group, still speaking with their hands and with heavy frowns, I’ve no room to pay heed to him. Simply couldn’t as I begin to correct and supply different understandings from all the forefathers and foremothers of quantum theory - had these people even discovered quantum theory yet? Had they even discovered and harmonized the school of astrophysics? Felix watches and we exchange several glances. Each time widens smile that grows in response to his astonishment.

After all that writing, I sit up to pass it to him. Solas and Dagna both ask several questions, to which Felix lifts his hand as if to pause them. He reads through it. Rereads. And then reads again.

“Father?” his voice quivers in addition to being soft.

“Yes, Felix?” the hardness about Gereon melts when addressing this man; given their likeness I bet them father and son.

“She’s a mathematician. Of a kind...” Felix states this lamely as he leans back on one foot, staring at the parchment as if he had just been slapped.

“Ah yes. Why wouldn’t the strange woman who soothes demons and purifies lyrium ALSO be a mathematician. How could we have missed such a thing?” Dorian nears the table that Dagna, Felix, and I stand at.

“Quite; how did you discover this, Felix? We did not hear you speak of it,” Vivienne, instead, remains stationary, elegant hand planted on her hip.

“Well… we only just found this out… now. She uses far different symbols; ways to describe cosigns and more, but… The patterns are all the same. She… just wrote a theory to describe how light can take on the forms of matter, and how it operates on the same spectrum as sound, among others… Because she was describing how these work,” Felix gestures to the walkie talkies, his finger shaking as he points.
Felix pauses a moment while he grips his chin.

“How she solved what we’ve been trying to understand for hundreds of years at the college in Val Royeaux… That light can take on the qualities of matter. And here… Because she knows so much of light and its properties, it looks like… She understands that space and time are two aspects of one whole… Do you know what that means, Father?” squinting at the paper, he points to the formula describing light, as if to prompt description. “What do you call this?”

“Atom,” I supply as excitement begins to well at the base of my stomach. This man understands mathematics. I’m… communicating… I’m communicating!

“Atom,” Felix repeats. I smile and nod.

What comes next is the strangest conversation I’ve ever held in my life, even in the midst of all the elves and monsters and mutants. Felix begins to scribble furiously several long proofs, all which I correct with margins for potential error so he may correct me if he so wishes.

While the laws of physics apply here to what I’ve witnessed I’ve seen enough to remain open to everything. The universe is under no obligation to make sense to me, but I have the tools... the knowledge withstanding, to begin to approach this unknown.

As Felix and I swap sheets of parchment that grow in number in our haste to discuss reality and the rules around it, the others loom nearby, watching in silence as we scribble away.

“I feel like I’m witnessing something diabolical,” Dorian supplants. “This kind of intelligence has always made me nervous,”

“You must be nervous often, then,” Mahanon chuckles.

“You wound me, truly,”

We get to a point where our mathematics discuss beyond light, how to interpret it, how fast it moves (I’m still lost on how they measure velocity but we work around it) and I smile again. This man understands what I’m writing! It may not be ‘I’m hungry’ or ‘help me’ but at the very least we understand how we each interpret the world!

All of this said without one word. Strange concept, but one I’d willingly take. My brain is on fire at this revelation… I had been a fool, cruel to myself not recognize that someone might be a mathematician, a scientist… To not at least treat Math as the universal language, a tool… a mode of communication.

Had these people even discovered elements yet?

Felix must not be the only one capable of this type of knowledge, he must have had teachers. Dozens. Dagna, too, seems to possess the propensity for engineering with her gifted mind. It strikes me that there are others who could explain the nature of this realm in ways I could at least understand… how many could understand.

Quickly grabbing another sheet, I begin to scribble furiously of what I remember of the Nobel prize winners from 2012 and their breakthrough of electron placement at a quantum mechanics level. How two could occupy the same space… Quantum mechanics seems apt; operating within space and time… A space of dreams and realities.

Different worlds.
What if I could explain, or begin to understand how I came to be here? If I could go back… There might be nothing left. But to go back… I had been too dazed, too encumbered by grief to settle into what is natural.

One formula wouldn’t be enough. Felix is exceptionally gifted, but his math showed that the masters he had learned from had not yet learned enough. Perhaps due to war or other violence that these people face consistently. The antithesis to the pursuit of knowledge - I’ve experienced this firsthand.

I want him to know - to hint that I am not from here, if they don’t know already. I’d need to build a path to this vision for him. I begin to scribble another theory to attempt to show the interpretations of quantum mechanics. Then another discussing what I considered to be theories with little merit. And then another, and another. And another. All connected. Suddenly I have a small pamphlet filled with writing - silence all around me.

Felix takes each sheet and, I assume, attempts to explain to those surrounding as we exchange. I am nearly vibrating with excitement.

As I wagered, Quantum Mechanics wasn’t something that Felix seemed to be familiar with. However, he catches on unparalleled quickness; asking question by subverting his own math to which I correct. How brilliant of him!

Theory and postulation were my strong suit over observational physics. My sister had always said I was too far into my own head. Funny how I had never wanted to believe in the many-world interpretation… How fantastical it seemed then. But now… This was too much to completely balk at.

Once I finish, I push the pile of parchment to Felix. He snatches it up faster than I can blink and begins to thumb through it. Biting my forefinger, I watch as he reads over the formulas that have grown increasingly complicated over the past half hour - how he understands some of the iconography is beyond me. How I understand his is even further perplexing.

The point is that we understand each other.

I owe it to the patterns.

I owe it to all those before me to lay these stepping stones.

I see it in the fear and wonder in his eyes as they widened while drifting down the pages.

Once he finishes, he releases the parchment and I watch it flutter to the table. I quickly snap back up to gauge his reaction. Astonishment paint his pallid features. His brows quirk as if to say ‘Is this true?,’ his mouth hanging open slightly.

I nod and he exhales a breath far too big for his body as he rubs a hand over his face.

“What is it that she’s shared?” Solas asks, his arms clasped so tightly behind his back that he looks as if he was born without them. I give the rest of them a momentary glance; their expressions bewildered, confused. Solas, alone, seems to be that level of dangerously unreadable, his lips pressed thin. He had been here, standing beside me for the majority of this exchange with little to no involvement. I wonder what he thinks?

Gereon also stands out with an expression similar to one of someone who’s just witnessed the birth of a five headed cow.
Ignoring them for the time being, I turn back to Felix. With how pale he is, I worry that he may pass out. Glancing down, my hands are quaking. I might join him.

“Maker… this is some of the most complicated… It proves… If... If this is true... This postulation could mean possibly mean that she is aware of the structure of the world, and those beyond... That there are worlds beyond, all governed by what appears to be a specific set of mathematical rule.” Felix covers his mouth for a moment, pausing to read over the back and forth of our writings again. They nearly look like a blanket covering Dagna’s work table.

Felix draws another shaking breath, sweat on his forehead from either excitement or illness. Maybe both. I didn’t care; he knows what I’ve written. If I could astound him like this, I wonder what other possibilities, what other ideas and theories these people have that could blow my mind.

Aside from the magic, that is. I wonder what they call their elements… If they knew of less, or of more. If they had even discovered their own version of the table at all. I gaze at the bag of Lyrium still in Mahanon’s hands wondering what its chemical compound. I’d not seen anything even remotely similar to microscopes or telescopes. But surely...

“What she has written here… She postulates all that we know is made of infinitely tiny structures and how energy is all forms of matter, regardless of how it interacts with individuals... To quantify magic. To understand magic in all forms... Andra... What are these?” Felix gestures towards various sheets outlying the barest bone proofs of the four fundamental forces.

“Electromagnetism, Gravity, Weak Interaction, Strong Interaction... And possibly a fifth. It had been theorized, but not known.” I say, pointing to each proof and set of equations. Pulling the associated sheets that only just barely describe each of the universes fundamental building blocks. Of course they wouldn’t understand anything I’ve said - but Felix understands this. A start.

“She speaks - what language is that?” Fiona says after a long moment of silence.

“Ing’Glesh, I believe. It is not a language connected or substrate of any others I have previously encountered.” Solas speaks, sounding as if he is eons away while his fingers card through the parchment... His eyes flicker a few moments in understanding in recognition across some of the proofs.

“I... I have to write back to my advisers at the University in Val Royeaux to gain further insight... Would that be permitted?” Felix engages Mahanon for a moment, his voice small and tentative before he begins again "What she’s written here could mean that there’s worlds beyond worlds. Beyond… the Fade. Beyond the Void, even.” Felix speaks thickly, as if his tongue suddenly became too fat for words.

The surrounding collective bristle or blanche.

Either they will believe or they will think me insane; both prospects are terrifying.

Chapter End Notes

HeadCanon - My thoughts of the DA:I timeline is that it's comparative to Earth's 1400-1500 AD. Which means mathematically there's a huge difference. I’m also taking into account that they have systemic zombie blights that control their population and stunt scientific progress.
It is estimated, roughly from various sources, that Thedas has a population of about 20 million people. So, very small.

HeadCanon - Elvhen, Dwarven, and Qunari anatomy is much more... striking than we see in the games. It's why Andra is so often lost in staring at them. People definitely notice a 'weirdness' to her human features, too. Thedas humans and Earth humans may have evolved differently.

HeadCanon - Flora, Fauna, and most everything is DIFFERENT than Earth. But the similarity is still enough so that she can eat, breathe, and drink.

I was super excited to get to the Felix bit. As soon as I knew he was a mathematician, I knew he'd play an integral role.

Now, for those of you who are mathematicians, physicists, and cosmologists, I apologize for the movie magic; I'm an artist and love science but am still just an amateur so I'm taking liberties here and going with a 'KPAX' vibe to set up the trope for the super macguffin.

Next chapter should be more 'interaction' we'll get a bit of Favrun, Panenlan & Rasa, Cole, and more Solas!
I can't believe there are over 100 of you subscribing to this wild adventure into the unknown. Thank you for all the kudos, book marks, and especially the comments! Much love and many thanks!

The 'theme song' to this fic is "Trails and Trials" by Noveller

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*Inscrutable*

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*Clark Ashton Smith - Pine Needles*

O little lances, dipt in grey,
And set in order straight and clean,
How exquisitely clear and keen
Your points against the cobalt day!

Attesting what consummate art
Ye fringe the limpid firmament,
O little lances, keenly sent
To pierce with beauty to the heart.

---

“Beyond the Void, even.”

An atypical countenance is upon Andromeda’s bearing; she is openly *smiling*. It is the first time those startlingly straight teeth have been fully bared; far too white. The vibrations escalate to a warbling buzz, pleasant and energetic. A stark contrast to growing suspicions. They curl further and faster in attempt to assemble anything plausible. There is… much information, but little to make it cohesive. It is difficult to maintain silence, but observation is imperative. Silent, I remain thus, gripping knuckles to the point of cracking.

Of my own delving into the Fade these past few nights, *nothing*. Mahanon is utterly, abysmally correct: little is directly known. There was much to be mindful of after Haven, but in light of this... As all of these counterpoints surface, perhaps it is not so strange to acknowledge that we deal with more than a mere foreigner. It is a fault in my actions to not place more interest in those maps... Or complete inaccessibility within the Fade. Or her unprecedented resistance. Or the aversion of spirits. Or that ‘gun’. Or that pink slate that responds to touch and holds stills of time.

*Or to be addressed as one of the Void by those older than the veil.*

It is a rarity to be so uninformed after so many years.

How many times have I patiently waited for a slip of tongue, a crack in a mask in the days past? That first week? The spymaster even went at length to expose Andromeda into something tangible - a spy,
a decoy, a simpleton. Instead, the longer we lay in wait for this elaborate ruse to dissolve, the more it confirms Andromeda’s unprecedented obliviousness to the matters of waking Thedas. And the startling effects she has upon it.

“I have never seen physics theorized like this,”

Indeed. Brought down from heady thought, I lean over the table to leaf through what was written. Her hand is sharp, clean, practiced, someone who is hyper aware - much like the writing we’d seen in her journals before… Yet, never to this extent. This is a surging effort - a sudden realization that Felix could stand level with her in ways others could not.

Knowledge flows with ease from that peculiar quill as if she a wellspring and it a snapped spigot. While this application is beyond my personal modicum of understanding, I have seen others, both in the Fade and of so long ago, conceptualize with astounding genius. This… seems beyond even those clear memories, even without Felix’s emotional response. What else could we divulge through Felix’s approach? Why had caused Andromeda to withhold this for the past two months?

“Space Time...” Dorian murmurs, heavy intention fastened upon Magister Alexius “That... might possibly make sense. But that is such... a leap.” The reticence nestling between the two of Tevinter spoke precisely of what allowed Alexius to remain alive. Time Magic, and his understanding of it. Though… I fear Andromeda has less to do with when. Instead, it is imperative to start asking where, and why, and possibly who.

Without doubt, there exists a ‘what’.

It is still up for consideration if it should be followed by ‘are you?’

“What’s the likelihood this... has something to do with the red lyrium future we saw in Redcliff?” Mahanon’s tenor is strained as he squints at some of the proofs, unable to comprehend the scrawling between Felix and Andromeda. Pausing, the rest of the advisers, including myself, watch as he surveys the undercroft. There’s a suspicious lack of activity; missing are the blunt resounds of iron clashing iron. A tense lack of voices exchanging openly, the cessation of movement - all the other employs have lulled to listen in on what was transpiring here. Word is indeed like the wind.

“The length of time, and the location, between Redcliff and her appearance do not align well enough, even for an uneducated guess,” Dorian answers only so that those surrounding hear. A moment slides, his lips part in the hesitation of what to say next. “We... simply do not know. I believe it is time for us to take what we do know and attempt to apply it. You’re back and the hold for some time now, yes?”

“I am, and we are.” Mahanon huffs. “My intentions were concerning her more immediate abilities. This...” Mahanon slaps the sheets of parchment down against Dagna’s table, the recoil causing them to float a few inches further from their impact. “Whatever this is, requires privacy and more time than what I’ve dedicated to this today.”

There’s a lull in the impromptu meeting, all cessation baited at Mahanon’s pause. His resolve is quickly found.

“You two--” Mahanon turns to the young Templar and the Dalish ranger that escorted Andromeda to the undercroft. Both, still present at the steps having not been dismissed, snap to attention. The templar awkwardly clanks fist against his chest as the ranger leers forward on the balls of his feet.

“Bring a medic. Tell them their bloodletting kit is required,”
At the very mention, I aim to interject. “Inquisi–”

“We’ll hear what you have to say in private quarters,” Mahanon firmly denies consult and continues. “Inform Lady Cassandra and the Knight Commander they are needed within the War Room. Advisers,” Mahanon looks to Vivienne, Dorian, and myself.

“You will research what you can based on your personal faculty. I expect reports. Fiona, given your experience with Blight sickness- I want you to be certain she isn’t infected.” He squares himself, hands on his hips. His yellow eyes have taken to that piercing gaze. So often does disagreement divide us, but I can, and do, recognize his ability to organize. One of several parallels to his vallaslin for Elgar’nan. The arrogance is an unfortunate, and glaring, byproduct.

Fiona nods to show she is attentive and willing. Dorian and Vivienne are statuesque.

“If she is immune to the sickness and can purify lyrium without becoming infected, then we will have her do just so.” As Mahanon delegates with hardened and quick resolve appropriate to his station. “This is an imperative order as it may be a temporary solution to our lyrium shortage.”

“Will Felix be in attendance? Andromeda does not display a concrete understanding of magic,” a wedge of unweighted silence allows me to question. I am more than curious and do not wish to relinquish the first person to expose Andromeda’s sudden, and altogether unexpected, wealth of knowledge.

“We don’t need words or thoughts for this - just blood for now.” Mahanon spares a glance over Andromeda - his mercurial approach to humans elusive to even me. I say nothing to the need of blood. The variety of uses one could procure with is, in brief, vast. Mahanon narrows his eyes once he realizes any kind of rebuke would come at a later time; I will not give it here in front of so many.

“While I’m certain you wish for time and for consideration - Action is needed, now. The sound that affects the veil, her… mathematics… Whatever this all is, will be what you research on outside of your standard duties. With so many Vints and so many mages, I’d expect some kind of binding spell to work, eventually.” Mahanon’s steadfast, imperious gaze meets the wide, intense stare of Andromeda - they the antithesis of the other. One soft, curving lines and passive perception the other angular corners and blunt, driven alacrity.

The heresy that Vivienne had lay in wait for finally breaks water. “You can’t be serious that you’d allow blood magic for- for this.” Breaking from the group towards the stairs. Vivienne’s strides are long and precise in her immediate revulsion. Mahanon watches her with disinterest before nodding, as if to dampen the First Enchanter’s indignation.

“Solas has claimed, on multiple occasions, that she’s resistant to magic; I am not so foolish to allow a maleficar to muddle around with things they don’t understand. The blood will immediately be for phylacteries - if those will even work. Most will be to test its interaction with lyrium… Perhaps, also, to test her humors. Solas claims she harbors magic of a kind and I now cannot disagree. She’ll be conscripted like the rest,” For a moment, Mahanon and I meet eyes - as if he expects further challenge. He still does not receive one.

Schooling the ire that wells down into a manageable calm, I’m brought back down as Andromeda stands from the stool, pushing it underneath the table. In our proximity, the air mingles with the scent of hot iron, alchemical reagants, and- Dorian was absolutely correct; that scent is exactly that of cake. If attention wasn’t demanded and divided on all fronts, I’d be of a mind to contemplate it further. But attention is demanded and divided.

Andromeda’s gaze is adhered to the sheets cast about the table. Beyond the singular word spoke
earlier, she's participated not once since. I am unable to discern what that expression is she wears, but
the acuity is certainly felt. If I could just find that presence in the fade, to make some kind of
comprehensible contact...

“I’ve yet to respond to the proprietor of the Black Emporium. Leilana has mentioned that perhaps we
may find a resource to expedite Andromeda’s learning through subversive means. If direct
application doesn’t work.” Mahanon’s hidden order lay in those last words.

That… is a thought. If it still exists within the hold... Perhaps it can still be utilized...

“We’ll get you talking yet, but perhaps later.” Mahanon claps Andromeda’s shoulder to feign
amiability. It is his power-stricken palm that he uses - I remember his first commentary about it
assuaging the mark. Plainly, it does not land as intended as she shirks against his grip. Her shoulder
brushes against my side, her spine stiff, straight. The micro-conversation through their body language
relays far more than words.

Though his bristling does not show in his posture, it presents itself in the momentary sneer across his
mouth. His fingers bite into the softness of her shoulder before he releases and turns to Dorian.
Andromeda, in turn, slumps in a kind of defeat. Her fingers lift a sheet of parchment as the others
descend into further conversation about a potential increase of lyrium stores.

That vibrating trill had faded as the conversation heightened. That palpable noise of… excitement
bled down into a familiar constant thrum. Only through the flickering of her eyes and the paced
intake of her breathing do I also recognize uncertainty. Her measure of body language is high - likely
how she worked well enough and relied on the serving elves, recoiling as they are to humans.

It isn’t long before a location change towards Josephine’s office. Dagna and Felix bid farewell as
they’re left in the undercroft, but not before Andromeda rebounds back to wordlessly gift one of
those peculiar mechanical quills to them. I, only for a moment, wonder how many she has.

Andromeda rejoins the group- making no eye contact as she falls betwixt myself and Dorian.
Though Mahaon leads, she struggles to stay behind, drawing in a pace that is remarkably quick, light
on the balls of her feet despite her wide hips. Conditioned for constant urgency? The longer I watch -
the stranger her mannerisms reveal themselves to be.

While questions do not flit from Andromeda’s mouth, they are confessed in other ways. Upon
entering the main hall, she lingers too long on the exit-way. It’s now mid morning - the bright light of
day bleeding in. Only two Orlesian nobles sit, a meal of tea and sweet bread between them. It is
beyond them she stares - and this look I read well; the contemplation of escape.

As if to calm or dissuade, whatever her thought process might be, I place my palm over her shoulder.
Light, gentle, supportive - unlike the bruising grip I held the day before yesterday. Her skin is soft
and supple from the bath. I note, in a fleeting moment of pride, that she does not recoil and instead
nods while releasing a heavy sigh through her nostrils. The look we exchange, yet again, leaves me
lost in its meaning. Our gesture goes unnoticed as Mahanon is preoccupied in walking conversation
with the other two mages.

Once present in the hall before the War Room, where so long ago its purpose was utilized in similar
functions, Josephine welcomes us with first a quirk of her brows and then a wash of understanding.
She rises from the high-backed fauteuil, the wood grating against the stone.

The first request Mahanon relays is a change of Andromeda’s quarters, large and unfettered. We’d all
deduced the reasons as to why without directly asking. Shortly after, a surgeon, two templars, The
Seeker and the Knight Commander enter; Leiliana follows them as if an unspoken sense drew her near.

Mahanon directs the medic to Andromeda, and a side table near Josephine’s desk. Three burettes of blood are the medic’s directive. As the woman swathed in stiff, off-white linens begins to pull her lancets and cuppings from her cache, Andromeda’s expression slips into one of suspicion - eyes narrowing.

This will not go well.

It is when the medic approaches her, lancet in hand and her own arm out to demonstrate, a variety of explicitly hostile emotions color Andromeda as she finally understands. Drawing her arms against her chest, she takes a step backwards - one singular human against the tide of the Inquisition’s needs will not win.

“You’re going to use that for what exactly?” Andromeda bites out; her wide eyes flashing at the medic’s tools. Despite nearly every modern language known to Thedas at wield in this room, it is that thick, strange tongue that heightens attention. For one so quiet and hauntingly placid, this burst of defiance raised the hackles of most. Had Mahanon been of a more inquisitive nature, this need not end with seeding distrust in one so willing.

“Absolutely not; you’ve not even disinfected that - let alone my skin!” Andromeda warns again despite it being pure babble. The collective group frowns for a collective of reasons. Myself included. Mahanon steps forward, nodding towards a templar - as if he’d known this resistance to happen. The bulk of the young human stalks towards Andromeda as if she were an animal.

Vivienne, at ease whenever others are discomforted, sniffs “At least that’s an appropriate reaction when mages demand your blood;”
For the first time in weeks, I am alone.

The remaining shards of day reflect against the stone walls. There’s a singular gargantuan window and attached is an equally large treated wood shutter, propped open halfway. Ushered by the stone walls outside wind whips into the room. Skin prickling from the chill of it. Just outside the window is about a quarter-mile drop down into a valley basin. It’s a clear view of the mountain range. Just at the apex remains that radium glow. Jagged snowcaps combine that green and the dusky evening pinks. The sky is barren of any cloud formation, foretelling a cold evening.

Earlier morning had been a whirlwind of excitement. The afternoon? Embarrassing and disappointing. Turning to face the chamber, complete with groin vaults, I remain propped against the chilled stone.

The previous dorm was less lavish, but it held the comforting presence of other bodies. While this room came with more space and furniture and privacy, it is a single - located in the underbelly of the keep. A large bed is pressed against the wall, threadbare curtains sag from the four posters surrounding. Paintings and simply carved statues adorn each corner. One shelf, stocked sparsely with books, stands next to a table surrounded by three chairs. Two high-back overly stuffed chairs face the hearth.
All hues subdued from age.

It is a positive notion that this is not a cell. I think of the cuffs wrapped around Gereon’s wrists as I adjust the makeshift linen bandage.

When realized it was blood they wanted, I refused. My own sense of self-preservation skewed: appearing late, not at all, or bursting forth as if suddenly insulted and needing to contradict a wrong. Always a mess. While defending oneself is mostly a healthy and expected endeavor, Mahanon hadn’t been won by such display. I understand his intensity, but I do not appreciate being held down to have a vein shunted open. Crudely.

Dawning upon this, it is my long string of passive acceptance that’s allowed me to go unscathed thus far. Now, a weighty decision lays bare: whether I continue to accept whatever treatment is offered, or to find creative means of defense. My sudden usefulness to them a seems a dangerous path.

The lancet, and yes I am exaggerating, was the largest ever used. One cup taken by the medic - for humors they said. Whatever they’d attempt would be hard-won given they left the vestibules uncapped.

The other two cups were specified for what is likely research. While that did not make the theft better per se, the notion that they were interested in learning was comforting... Certainly, if me approaching Felix with mathematics didn't convince these people of something... more... Then perhaps they’d find differences in those samples.

A gust shocks me back into the present and presses through the room harder. Enough to prompt the closing of that large shutter. It draws shut with surprising ease. With the only source of light now cast out, there’s nothing but neutral blackness.

Blindly digging out the ferrorod from my satchel on the bed, I move to the hearth. All it requires is a single downward stroke for it to bleed sparks over the logs neatly stacked inside - small piles of kindling already built at the base. Not as elegant as Dorian’s approach, or any mage, yet the sparks bud immediately into the kindling. Wrought iron tools rest along the smooth stone. Grabbing the poker, I wrap scrap linen around the tip and dip it against the blaze to light the rest of the sconces.

The swathing of orange flame enrobes the room with light.

While there is definitely something to be said about the over-consumption of resources, I do sorely miss buildings wired for electricity. It wouldn't be too impossible to design a gravity light, possibly.

The inside of my arm twinges upon setting the poker down. After today’s spectacle, I refused healing for the gash that medic made. Perhaps with too much aggression, as Solas and Fiona, the ones who offered, subsequently gave wide berth. Hindsight dictates my refusal as immature. Yet… I no longer intend to suffer their unwillingness to communicate. What an uphill battle both ways that will be.

Soon after, I was lead to this room, told to stay. Even now, a guard looms just outside. My belongings brought down shortly after.

Lifting my satchel from the bed, I move to place it in one of the chairs, taking the one beside it. Withdrawing the quarter-filled journal, the Trade Speak book, and the last two pens to my name, I set about to writing what I do know of Thedas. If only to collect disordered thoughts.

The variety of species - the vast difference of flora and fauna, yet their startlingly uncanny similarity to Earth. Chemically similar was their atmosphere as I wasn’t dead, quite yet. Of the vertebrates I’ve seen - all consume matter to sustain energy. And created waste, participated in emotional
communication, and reproduced much like the general ecosystems on Earth. How a variety of sentient humanoid life-forms came to evolve would have been a playground for evolutionary biologists.

Culturally, most are superstitious and religious; there are also severe racial dynamics at play. That, and I've only experienced a fraction of what could be here... Five, sentient beings, one... technically invertebrate - if at least in form of itself. How many more?

Despite the elves being the dominating demographic within this organization, I've witnessed cruel interactions beyond my ability to intervene. I have yet to figure out why - as elves seem to be superior in musculature and magic despite their smaller stature. Elves and Qunari would likely be the apex predators they were to exist on Earth. I shudder at the thought of Earthen and Thedosian politics colliding.

Qunari were few, Dwarves are welcomed but fewer. The tension lies largely between the elves and humans, their largest populations.

But that is anthropological politics regarding them - my needs lie in a different approach of thought… All hypothesis seems fantastical. But this place is straight out of a picture book, so why disallow that line of creative thinking? In a situation like this, it’s imperative to use whatever necessary - to discern how and why.

They did have an awfully well stocked library… But I need to learn to read their language... Unless... Mathematics... There were discernable patterns within Felix's work... Perhaps if I were to start there...

“Pretty, if once fancies dungeons,” someone calls, crackling and wise and warm sound.

Standing in the entryway is Favrun.

The very sight of her square, boney face and coppery head is an unexpected and wholesome comfort. Her hair is down in a braid that slides over her shoulder, grey wisps at her temples. Wearing her evening dress and thick leather belt, she’s dressed down from her apothecary's clothes. Supported in her small hands is a tarnished tray topped with steaming food - likely stew, because stew is this culture’s namesake.

The scent brings my mouth to water. I’d not eaten an actual meal since Mahanon and Varric had downed those fox-like creatures.

Explains the dizziness.

Springing to assist, I use their words in greeting. “Hello, Favrun,”

There is a knowing kindness despite the severity of her small stature. Her eyes flicker to the bandage on my arm. a skeptical ‘hmm,’ her response.

As the tray shifts hands, I am moderately amazed at the sheer heft of it. Sliding my writing to the wayside, I set it carefully down on the table that was otherwise bare, Favrun following into the room.

“All missed you listening to me talk,” Favrun chuckles to herself as she pulls off a hunk of biscuit to pop into her mouth. Chewing, she says “It took a chain of asks for permission to see you. That trip with the Inquisitor seems to have gone… as expected,” Favrun’s speaks with a playful rasp, but apprehension lingers.
Shrugging, I knew the reason for the change of rooms, the sudden overbearing attention. There were multiple reasons, but one seemed to interest them the most.

“Mahanon. Lyrium.” as I speak, she watches with sharp amber eyes, pupils constricting. The wrinkles at the corner of her nose deepen as she nods once. She surveys the room with far more judgement than I. But then...

There is movement behind Favrun’s legs. A shoulder, a small foot...

“I’ve brought more than just myself for dinner,” Favrun side-steps to reveal the boy Idrilla and I had found amongst the burning wagons nearly a week ago. Panenlan. His tiny arms struggle to hold his sister, Rasa, upright. Her chunky body fusses against his chest, her face screwed into a pouting scowl.

Overwhelming chaos of the past few days stretched to what felt like a month - to see them so soon after...

“Hello, Panenlan,” my words are small and quiet for the boy who’d said barely a word on the three day walk back to Skyhold. They’re both cleaner, and in boxy, ill-fitted clothes for their tiny limbs. Still endearingly alien with their massive eyes and uniquely arranged faces.

“Been asking about you since the day after you left; his sister’s sprouting teeth and he thinks you can do something about it. Magic for her dreams, he says,” Favrun leans in on the last couple of words as the baby squawks, uncomfortable in her brother’s hold. He steps forward, arms shivering as he offers Rasa up.

“The magic noise. It makes her dreams better, shem.” There is a demand behind each word, but given what he’s been through in the past few days, he could ask mountains of candy and toys and break them all. And I’d let him. I hadn’t interacted with many children in Thedas simply because there weren’t many to be found. Thank fuck.

I stoop to lift Rasa. Gone are the beads and tight leather swaddle. Her eyes are as blue-black as her brothers and eerily large for her small skull. Feathers of white hair stick straight out on her head. She reminds me, only slightly, of a newly hatched pigeon.

Favrun dons that severe frown, softened only partially for someone so young. “Do not use that word, Panenlan.” her tone is even but with no room for abatement. Panenlan doesn’t respond, instead acutely trained on his sister. She no longer fusses and instead focuses on one of my stray hairs. As most babies are wont for it, she tugs, and sharply. I allow it with minimal wincing.

She smiles and it seems to calm Panenlan.

“Hungry?” I ask and before the word finishes an exit, Panenlan’s already climbed into a free seat. His heels dangle just over the edge, the linen around his waist bunched in awkward angles. Rasa supported against my chest with one arm, I use my free hand to set my books to a free corner of the table. The last thing I expected of today was this.

What a strange week.

“He’s... a bit touched from what happened. Keeps asking where his parents are. This one’s been cries like she’s been taken by Despair and she’s barely half a turn round the sun.” As Favrun speaks, something picks at an unseeable part of her; a section that has begun to fray but not into disrepair. I cannot tell what it is, but I see it in the way her face sags. She smooths her palm against Rasa’s cheek before tending to the dinner trays.
This meal is one meant for sharing. The large crock in the middle has three smaller bowls surrounding. A small plate of pleasantly colored... mush sits to the side along with a leather capped bottle- what I assume is for Rasa.

The thick stew, a golden curry brown, is far more savory than the stuff I found myself sick on when first arriving. It's possible to have built a tolerance, also. Flecks of fried meat litter the top - I’d only seen a few of the creature it likely came from: large naked capybaras with opposable thumbs. Nugs, I believe.

I watch Favrun fill each dish. Cheese, biscuits, and boiled purple roots are the additional course. Some kind of wine, even for Panenlan, in small cups. The scrape of bread, the plopping of spoons, the clink of metal bowls. Sitting with Rasa in my arms, Panenlan at my side, an inviting meal to the front, and Favrun’s firm motherly guidance across keeps me silent. In appreciation, not inability.

The meal settles into a comfortable, quiet one. There is no pressure or demands in anyone’s gaze, just world-weariness and desire for consistency. While all three of the elven mothers spare a kind of altruism, Favrun simply gives more.

She, much like Araina and Eshne, have several honed talents. Skilled in culinary, with the speed and precision worthy of a sous chef, it is even more commendable Favrun’s abilities as a botanist and apothecary. It is through that scarlet effervescence that Idrilla is still alive.

Tonight, her patience is ever present - her speech is slow so that I may attempt to follow. Aside from hunting with Idrilla and bumping into Varric, Favrun is the only one who has attempted to approach me with vocabulary. Needing both friends and to learn to speak, it was difficult not to cling to her. I don't care if I'll end up sounding as if every sentence is sewn together with cheese cloth. It’s painfully obvious that she is not a linguist, so my syntax be damned.

After Rasa is fed, I lift the book on Trade Speak up to show Favrun at her asking. We practice a few words, I repeat the syllabary again at her request. Panenlan sits, listening quietly with half-toned interest. He’d inhaled his first helping and is marching stoically through his seconds.

“Why does she speak funny,” he asks, not looking at anything but the biscuit in hand. After another large chomp, he says around his chewing “Sounds weird.”

Favrun looks over him a moment, her cheek resting in her palm. Now that she had her fill, Rasa now back in my lap. “Not everyone knows the Trade tongue. Not every stranger should be expected to speak it, either… But, if you are of a good heart, you could help her learn,”

“Hmm,” Panenlan leans back, his cheeks puffed out on the last of his biscuit. Even elf children have sharp teeth and I wonder how much more carnivorous elves were than the rest of the sentient species.

“She must make Rasa sleep good. Then she can be my da’len.”

Favrun barks a laugh, leaning forward as she claps her palm against the hand rest. Once she composes herself, a smile like that of a satisfied cat, spreads about her. “That would confuse the Inquisitor and all the other Dalish, wouldn’t it? For you to be a Hahren with so few turns around the sun?”

Panenlan does not say anything, nodding solemnly.

Favrun takes to asking Panelan questions and I fall back into the role of listener - letting the sheer weight of the past week roil. Rasa stares, and has been staring, as she begins to fuss from eating and taking in air.
The room stills as we share a gaze. Something begins to pull at my throat and a tightly wound snare at the base of my gut begins a perilous unwinding the longer I look at her - a pit I’d avoided for some time. Funny how comfort tends to bring about disarm.

She needs to decompress, like I do. The pressure at her abdomen is enough of a tell. My pressure - hell if I know where to begin to poke around for it. It all feels like a taut latex balloon filled with blood pudding. I stand, shoulder a scrap of linen, and smooth the base of my palm over Rasa’s back, each revolution complete with a succinct pat.

I pace as I do so.

The relief this earns Rasa is almost instant. Her body feels so much like- I wince as a face floats just behind that dull, maroon space between thought and reality. She feels so much like Madelina had. Drooly lips and cooing babble. Babies even smelled similar here - that warm, milky, mammalian thing. Never had wanted children - but to protect them, educate them, love them.

As I pass the frame in a slow, aimless gait, a memory builds out one of my sister. She sits on the bed, her hair bobbed short but of the same frizzy blonde. It sways at her shoulders. She’d have started singing by now, and I’d have followed in deeper, less practiced, tones.

Amalthea the professional soprano, Andromeda the hobbiest contralto.

There wasn’t a single child within friends and family that we hadn’t been able to lull. Song and dance and art and literature had been her life’s purpose, my brothers’ purpose. They’d shown me the appreciation for it all. To sing, let alone fall into the memory of it... Dangerous. I’ve not spoken in full sentences for months. Not to the moon, the stars, to Madalina...

There are several lullabies cast with great importance in my memory, but the voices of friends, of family, of home accompany them. Not after today, not after this week - The weight to bear them for others isn’t possible. I can’t. Not when opening my mouth is in violent opposition to what little composure remains. I’m a taut balloon, remember?

Rasa has all but slipped away into sleeping silence, her feathery haired head supported by my palm. That ball unravels faster in the pit of my gut.

Did not think of them much because it had been safer.

Acceptance of my current reality would offer a kind of solace, but not every change comes easily. Though this should have been expected. There are so many variables - I can’t possibly prepare for them all.

Hands that aren’t my own shake around Rasa’s body; she barely moves when deposited into the fluff of the large four poster bed. Expression blissful. For a moment, it blurs. Instead of the blue dyed wool duvet, it is instead a rich sienna soil dug deep. Hands are coated with blisters from the shoveling. Shoulders sore. The smell of peat and flesh.

Instead of pointed ears and white feathery hair, Rasa’s hair is dark and curly. Ears rounded.

She rests on top, limbs sagging. She is not sleeping. They are not sleeping.

Whipping towards the hearth and rapidly blinking, air gets caught on on this stranger throat.

The scrape of stone underfoot is all I can focus on.

It’s so tight. It all feels so tight.
“Andra?” Favrun is far away, but she is real. Rasa is real. Idrilla is real. Panenlan is real. Felix is real. Varric is real. Solas is real. Those creatures are real. They are here.

There is a beating, a clanking - Can’t breathe, it’s so tight.

Somehow the window’s been reopened. The wind beats against skin. A mouth is gasping for breath. I am here.

But they are not.

“Come back to me, Andra,” Favrun is closer. "You are panicking. I am here. Come back to me,”

The backs of these eyes that must be mine sting, but there is no spilling. Teeth that still don’t feel like mine grit to the point of pain. Sharp, cool air battle its way into these strange lungs as I try to grip the images and moments of them as they were when they were alive: smiling and happy. From before, from before. It was… good, that before. A life earned.

One with music and adventure and family and learning and research and everything that I’d wanted, despite all its shortcomings.

But… Favrun is here, her small hand splayed against my back. Then my cheeks. Avoiding that concerned gaze, the stimulation still too much. The mountains in the distance slice a cloud formation that comes around it; the rain front that we had just left in the Arbor Wilds drawing North. Not a cold night, but a wet one. It is her thumb on my cheek that tethers me to this place. Favrun’s thin arms are surprisingly strong as I’m pulled into a hug, only awkward because of my lumbering limbs. She knows, she understands. She’s experienced this before. Kind of.

I shake my head. Working through these emotions wasn’t right, not yet. Too much after today, after this last week - A deep, pained wound underneath fresh cuts. I’d let it fester while I ghosted the grounds of Skyhold instead of juggling this variety of trauma like a good clown.

Christ, I’ve got to get it together.

Favrun smells like cloves, mint, vanilla. Those didn’t exist here, but biological compounds similar to them do.

Not the same, but similar.

My arms listen as they wrap around her in return. I do not know how long it is before clarity finally emerges, but it is some time we stand together. My grip upon Favrun suddenly tight. If it weren’t, I’d drift into some other place, beyond any sensical matter. She does not let me go.

“Thank you,” it is my voice.

“War has cost us much and you’ve seen a tremendous amount of danger this past week. It is understandable that you are stressed,” She cups my cheek and I catch only portions of what she has said. I nod, leaning into her palm.

A sniff pulls our attention over towards the table. Panenlan still sits on the chair but teeters on the verge of crying. He watches both Favrun and I, head dipped low. Children are also easily affected by emotional response here, it seems. We rejoin his side.

“Sorry,” unsure of how to comfort someone so young and so fresh in loss, I retake my seat. Tears
well around the corners of his lashes, his lower lip out.

“Are you sad, da’len?” he quakes in asking as he shifts forward on his seat.

“Yes,” I reply. I’d learned that frowning was sadness and smiling was happiness here, early on, and was thankful for the emotional consistency.

“I am, too.” his words punctuated by a hitched sob.

Favrun croons, rubbing his back. I lean forward to offer my hand - he takes it only after some hesitation. I wrap my fingers around his and run my hand over his head as he continues to cry. I’d never been talented at consolation; my only offering the sensation of touch.

In a sudden flurry of skinny arms and legs, Panenlan is in my lap shunting his face against my chest.

“Warriors do not cry,” his voice is muffled by shirt and collarbone as he shivers into a sob - a sound that twangs in a strange way coming from someone so seemingly new to their world. Favrun and I exchange weariness- no one comes out unscathed here, or elsewhere. I take to smoothing my hand over his back, as Favrun had mine, and as I had Rasa’s. If I could tell him that I’d soaked Favrun’s shirt with tears just a few days ago, that my bones shake even now, I would. I would even have attempted, however, a light knock on stone causes Favrun and I both to look to the doorway. I nearly roll my eyes at who stands there.

Lord, this day will not end.

Only the flickers of torchlight play upon Solas’ harsh features, frighteningly warping them. Despite an uncharacteristic apologetic expression there. He clasps his hands behind his back. His disjointed armlessness an illusion.

“Forgive me for intruding.”

“I will admit to some curiosity, Miss Nathis. The kinship you’ve taken with Andromeda since her arrival is unique; do you not think it unusual to tend to a human in such a way?” Solas asks of Favrun, sitting in Panelan’s previous seat. One hand rests upon the table, his fingers wrapped around a kind of small… stone. It is black and has several empty facets etched into it. The front is an incredibly minute sculpture of some kind of canine-like creature.

“I didn’t strike you for one who thought of humans as shemlens, Ser Solas,” Favrun leans slightly in her chair, one leg crossed over the other - although Solas is of a higher rank in the chain of command, Favrun is clearly more dominant. Solas stiffens at her statement, looking down the point of his nose.

“I apologize. That is not what I meant,”

“Then is it about her being an untrained mage? A runaway slave? A foreigner? A spy?” She laughs, almost cruelly, and I hide a smirk with the back of Panelan’s head. “You don’t strike me as a fool, so ask in honest light rather than political smoke. My reason? I lost my husband, Thanden, during the fifth blight along with my daughter, Rhysa.” Solas nods his head as if it’s an apology. Favrun continues, eating the last of her cheese and bread, chewing thoughtfully.

Ignoring them, I look to Panenlan who now sits forward in my lap. Panelan had eventually calmed, but Solas had taken residence in his seat. To keep him occupied, I’d given the boy a pen and free
range of my journal. He’d filled at least five pages with axes. Two more with the elk-deer he called Halla. Now, he draws a very wobbly, hairless head with pointed ears.

“If Rhyea had grown, she’d have looked like Andra. Rhyea had much of Thanden’s looks - big and blonde - and my quick spit. I know they say elf-blooded don’t have pointed ears, but Rhyea almost did. Almost.”

“Your husband was human?” Solas asks as he casts a grey gaze away into the hearth. The hand he rests on the table curls into a loose fist.

“Aye. Better than all the men I’ve ever known.” There is an unspoken warning in Favrun’s eyes.

“Thanden was a barrel of a man, twice as tall. But he was quiet and perceptive. Andra shares that. They look at the world in ways people shouldn’t understand. Makes’em quiet, complicated. Made Thandan good at evading Chantry intervention in the wilds around Lothering, ”

“An apostate,” Solas leans back, his brows high and tone slightly surprised. “You admit that so freely?”

“I’m not one myself, so I’ve little reason for concern. I’d never worried about him and what went on in the Fade, regardless. He’d nerves of everite,” She takes a long pull of wine, swirling what little remains. The next look she gives Solas is one of quiet challenge, as if their current subject neared its end.

“Andra is complicated. Undoubtedly. But she is of no harm. I’d know best. After Haven you and the Inquisitor threw her in my lap without so much as a look back. Now that word starts to spread and you find use in her, suddenly the Inquisition heads are interested,” Favrun then takes to finishing off her wine - for someone so small, her appetite is gregarious.

“Despite the rumors that’ve spread since then, I do not scare easily, Ser Solas,” Favrun sets her cup down with a firm snap, as if to end the conversation.

“We are all to have your steel, Miss Nathis,” Solas tips his head to Favrun as if to concede.

“And for a stubborn population to constantly battle with our well-intended yet cantankerous leader? Ha! But, this one looks to be slipping and the other is gone.” Favrun rises and begins to shift and gather the metal bowls on the tray. I speak to stop her instead of rising. Panelan still flips, drearily, through the journal in my lap. He’d filled at least twenty pages with complete nonsensical doodles, good for his hand and good for his mind.

“No,” I point to myself “Morning. Thank you,” I nod and she eases off immediately.

“Besides, I cannot shun a someone so kind to elves. May you learn the same,” Favrun tosses a cold, close-lipped smile to Solas “Come, Panenlan, it is late and your bed in the Chantry awaits you.” Panelan moves to the floor, wobbling for two steps. He turns to face me, the back of his head fluffy and messed, his eyes half-lidded.

“Good night, Da’len,” he yawns as he sets the pen back on the table. In the corner of my eye, Solas’s brow quirk.

“Good night, Panenlan,”

“No, Hahren,” Panenlan sternly corrects.
“Good night, Hahren,” I place my hand over his head, gently brushing my fingers through the ruffled tufts of pale hair. He does not smile, but the look he gives could potentially be one. He turns, grabbing at Favrun’s skirt, Rasa unawares and in bliss in older woman’s arm.

“Rest well, Andra - You’ll need it now that the Inquisition has use of you,” familiar with her farewells, I lean into her free palm as it presses against my cheek. These people are a touchy bunch, but I grow used to it.

“Thank you, Favrun,”

I find myself alone with Solas.

Turning to him only halfway, I find him observing the doorway with that impassive stare, that faceted stone now visibly between his fingers. Upon my inspection of him, we meet gazes. My cup of wine remains untouched - not the wisest choice of drink after today, but there is the foreboding sense that I’d need it. Motioning towards the chairs in front of the Hearth with cup in hand, he nods and stands to follow.

The silence between us is about as thick and as uncomfortable as the padding of arm chairs.

“I would like for you to speak. In ‘Ing’Ghlesh’,” Solas’ words are measured, his voice loud against the still room, despite his even timbre.


Staring at the stone… I’m positive this request has something to do with that; I’d seen Solas too many times to recognize - the stone a new variable. He also didn’t seem one to fidget. My first question was ‘why’ but, why even ask if the full breadth of his response would be lost?

Words, many, mostly angry, hurt, confused, rise… I place my feet, toes bare, against the floor to soak in the unusual, but welcome, warmth.

What would I say? What could I say? What should I say?

“I am aware it is highly arrogant of me to expect or assume assistance. You people are in a time of great need and I could be a threat. I know that it’s been thought of as much; objectively my presence is seen as threatening for... reasons I'm still not sure of. Yet...” I pause, looking up from the fire and straight into Solas. He stares, unreadable. “I am consistently lost as to what culturally is expected and shown- especially in light of concepts and skills that are beyond my level of understanding,” My hands begin to flow as I speak, a nervous tick developed as an adjunct and performing in choir.

"And today - Is it so difficult to wait, even a moment, to draw an image? To complete a charade? Any kind of gesture that would have demonstrated the need for my blood? Are my actions impacting differently than intended? Why hold me down? And for everyone to watch? Without so much as a word of intervention? I've... done what I could to be unassuming - I've let you take my things, drag me across the countryside... Just... three days ago we burned the bodies of twenty eight people! Thirty four percent were children! And there... were monsters! Eight of them and they nearly killed Idrilla! I understand that they're not... necessarily monsters, but grotesquely diseased.” I frown as he leans back in the chair, resting his hands over his lap. The small stone he holds between forefinger and thumb glows now. Despite how invasive suddenly vocalizing feels, despite that strange little stone that warns me to stop, I have an audience. After the near tears earlier, this sudden anger at the sight of Solas feels much better.
The sensation of speaking a grounding one “It’s been a little over two months… Two months in your time that I’ve been here and I can no longer afford to drift. Now that I can, and do, accept… I see that I’ve much to learn and overcome if I’m to weather this bizarre circumstance unharmed. After… To lose everything… I will not do so again.” fingers curling into a fist, I break away from him to look into the fire. Relaxing it, I drag it through my hair.

“This place... Is so... fantastical. There simply isn't enough objective data to even begin to figure out how I ended up here, let alone the amazing things you’re all capable of. Such small things that alter or ignore fundamental laws of motion dynamics... And, hell... Gravitational force can be completely ignored with a simple thought. Energy exists everywhere here, likely in ways that I've never even thought to hypothesize, yet... A medic rips open my arm for a blood draw! It's... so incongruent! Felix had been the first one to know how to discuss the mechanics of this place, in a way for me to be understood and to understand. And then to be ignored? I'm... angry that something like that would simply be ignored!” I do not pretend that I do not feel embittered by this morning.

A glinting in my periphery brings my attention back to the ever silent Solas. The stone glows brightly, dimming only as he adjusts the linen and leather undershirt to place it at the base of his throat.

“And that must be a trinket that… does… some kind of wondrous task completely irrelevant to any immediate need,”

“Instead, it's a creative solution. A bridging means of communication,” Solas responds with the barest smirk, in nearly perfect lyrical English.

Mother *Fucker.*

Chapter End Notes

AYYYYYYY. Finally - After 50k words, Solas finally does SOMETHING to communicate; in the next chapter, we'll understand why it's taken two months for this to happen.

Also - Favrun Nathis is BASICALLY Eartha Kitt, voice and all. Favrun is best ma'mae. If, and when, I finish this fic, I'd like to go back to add more interaction between Andra and her because... I just like them.

I like to envision elves as oddly alien, large eyes, long skinny bodies. Rasa being an ugly baby is the best way to describe it.

The first vision/panic attack involving Andra's late family members!

Can you guess the theme for their names? Andromeda? Amalthea? ;)
Deliberation

Chapter Notes

Still not beta’d! Sorry!

Long Author's Comments at the end.

Dialogue Heavy!

I've made a Spotify playlist for The Voidling! It's full of intense, melancholic, industrial ambience and is largely what I listen to when writing this fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14

Deliberation

Clark Ashton Smith - Perseus

I met her mirrored stare:

The cycles of stone glories

Locked in the Gorgon's glare.

Telahmis, duplicitous rogue and ranger of clan La’nehn, successfully extracts himself from station outside Andromeda’s quarters. The new directive: a twice-stomp to signal his temporary position at the end of the hall. Should someone draw near- a bow, or perhaps a dagger, will slip from a purposely careless grip, clattering to the floor in alarm. Rudimentary, but viable.

The weight of Andromeda’s gaze is heavy, expectant. Accompanied by that ever persistent sound that Skyhold’s imprisoned mages whisper of as rhythm and song. As a booted heel strikes twice against the stone, the wards, just moments ago placed on the entryway, feed on my will. Locking in any sound that might escape, but allowing for the flow in.

Meeting Andromeda now, there is a mild distrust hidden largely by somber fatigue. In the past three days, with constant presence permitting, her person dominates attention in a softer fashion than, say, tearing a massive hole in the fabric between my reality and Thedas. The only issue? Andromeda doesn’t seem to be aware of the precariousness of such attention.

A slight tilt of her golden head, pale skin ghostly - dark circles speak of what the medic had taken from her. Fingers wrapping around a carved wooden cup filled with wine, she motions to the chairs in front of the hearth and I rise to follow. That confectionary scent trails just behind.

I take to first word - or rather soft demand. If this relic of a gift is to serve purpose, those words untethered must be pressed against the veil and fed into one of the five remaining sieves. In the ages spent away, this attuned dirtha’gren, lay within a sealed chamber accessible only via spoken word of
SkyHold’s proprietor. Even I lapsed in its placement. It, the stone, is pompously named. I did not think so of his choices then.

There is little tell if this attempt will work. Yet, after the Inquisitor suggested seeking out Xenon the Antiquarian… It is best to know if this, if Andromeda, is an interference before Mahanon, or others. What of the consequences, should the Nightingale’s suspicion steer the way mine has? Andristanianism’s followers are not known for their benevolence. Yet, in light of religious barbarism, even Leliana, one only swayed by blood wrenched from stone, has begun to warm to Andromeda as the bystander.

And so, this climb into importance requires this level of subterfuge, despite Andromeda largely being seen as a victim of circumstance. Andromeda is no spy, at least not implicitly.

When approaching Cole, he skipped topic by losing himself in the needs and wants and hurts surrounding. A flinch at the mention of Andromeda’s name the only statement given.

Gentle prying elsewhere proved barren. The wisps that lay in wait when she slumbered, pure and unadulterated, focused solely on a purifying hum, unawares that an entity provided them this sanctuary.

The spirits, unknowingly, freed were also elusive. Dedicated to their abstracts now that they’d been restored. I would not deter them from an unexpected gift.

Additionally, Mahanon had mentioned the anchor’s sudden and unexpected force during the closing of the last rift. There is also this perplexing effect on Lyrium… The Fade and Titan’s Blood could not be further apart in origins or in use, but perhaps their unity lies in their corruption. Corruption the only blatant connection to an observer.

Andromeda, thus far, has much in common with the Dalish puzzle, June’s Knot. She complies with my demand- a fatal flaw in most who possess this willingness. Whatever thoughts had built today flowed forth, not with urgency but with consistency. Despite her apparent weariness, her voice holds a satisfying, smokey quality. It is akin to her earlier writing, one that had been honed without traces of grandstanding. Educated, clearly, but by whom?

Those many odd words feed the dirtha’gren, sluggish in its persistence. Each word and intention a saturate bead against taut canvas, their weight pooling within a deep reservoir. How luck remained in favour, combined with Andromeda’s reservation and the stunted absorption due to the Veil, is beyond me. Still, it draws along with intent and expression to build a heated pressure, hot against my finger tips.

It is another unknown how it will react to a language unwoven from any other I’ve known to exist. Even traces of ancient Dwarva remain within Tradespeak and the I will give credit where it is due concerning the Dalish. Of what little their grasp is on Elvhen, their worst sin is in diction.

Andromeda’s hands move animatedly with smooth, rolling precision. Expressively shifting between thoughtful annoyance and outright exasperation. A buried memory aches at the sight of an open hand cupping an intangible thought. A diplomat? No, an educator… patience dug this deep could likely belong to no other.

Wide eyes, an illusive copper in the warmth of the hearth, pin me to the uncomfortable Orlesian import. To be underneath this gaze not disagreeable as it is perplexing. It would be easy, and all too desirable, to open this with ‘Do you hail from beyond this world?’ but subtlety is needed as I do not know what kind of response this will earn.
Subtlety; what Mahanon lacks.

How each word is punctuated, palm open and extended, voice lilting upwards - it could as well be a series of rhetorical questions before it lulls into a quiet, morose stream. It is a sensation akin to observing a storyteller from afar, piecing together a narrative based on personal acumen rather than absorption. Curling those little tapered fingers in to a small fist, there is a resolve that I’d not been aware of before - either hidden or recently discovered. An adjustment period coming to a close.

A snap within the stone signals a wary readiness for use. Just below the bone of my throat the base of the stone connects, partially uniting with skin. A warbled series coils inwards, small strings of knowledge planting just within my grasp - strange only in how they lack visual connection.

Far slower than she speaks - context blooms metallic. A dissonance between this newly expressive Andromeda and the dirtha’gren. It is a disconcerting sensation, no matter the age one is, to fully understand language without visual context and bodily senses. As many and numerous as the I earned to feel. However, while it is cumbersome, it works.

Andromeda continues, narrowing in on my actions.

“And that must be a trinket that… does… something ominously irrelevant to any immediate need,” it takes several moments - but the words connect sensibly in time. Enough to catch a clever, if peevish, jab.

“It is instead a rare, yet creative, solution. A bridge to a means of communication,” imagery floats in shadows, mouth wrapping awkwardly around the thick words and heavy tongue. It feels forced and blunt; enough to manage, yet in no way comfortable. Like walking blind through a mire of my own creation; the visual disconnect dissatisfying.

Andromeda does not recoil, but the lightning-like shift of recognition flashes. That calm melancholy warps into a glower so filled with quaking, silent fury that I press back, aura prepared. The vibration against the veil sinks into a thrumming glissando. Reflexively, my own grip on the import’s armrest tightens. For all the defense I’d given without question, it’d largely been bought of my own desire to know more. Sympathy is doled to every individual, and in no way measurable by comparison.

Despite visible hostility that challenges even Cassandra Pentaghast’s fiery righteousness, Andromeda surprises instead with a question.

“How does it operate?” her voice trembles with impressively restrained anger. While the question is unexpected, it likely serves two purposes. One, to confirm that she had been both heard and understood. Two, to satisfy a curiosity.

There is little harm in indulging her with an answer.

“In brief, this stone absorbs the intent and vibration of whatever is pressed against the Veil. You’ve a grand grasp of your language - I did not anticipate to speak with such ease.” I divert, Andromeda the competent wordsmith I had hoped for - the Veil the only setback. “However, further conversation is needed as it improves with use,”

She gapes, mouth slightly parted, anger now a heated amalgamation of emotion. The first, and foremost, to be disbelief.

“A translator…” There is an airy chuckle that trickles into a pained murmur as she pinches the skin between her brow, eyes clamped tight. The next breath shivers as if to temper the rest of that heat.

“Why have you not brought this out until now?” she bites in hurt accusation looking up only to stare
into the quickly dying fire. Her tones have softened into ones less sinister, though the waves are awash in a thickness that's felt.

"Several reasons. My absence, namely. There are certain bindings, rituals, and spells that grant language, albeit temporarily. With your unprecedented magical resistance, I fear them too unpredictable to pursue."

To be observed, and understood, by Andromeda is an altogether disquieting experience; between moments of scrutinizing eye contact and the hypnotic haze of white noise, it is difficult to decide what my own emotional responses should be. Aside from the Veil's pressure, little sound exists above the decrescent coals and groaning gales against the latched shutter. The rain that followed from the South threatening to fall.

Andromeda inhales slowly before saying "I thought you used magic when I first woke up."

The word magic comes flows from her in tentative use, not distaste or distrust. It is a distinctly unique utterance. Her words 'woke up,' are sequestered for later inquiry.

"And what of when you look at this black mark? That is what you consider to be magic, correct?"

How quickly the heated expression falls, replaced by that cautious interest - It is a wonder how one survived with such an inability to remain angered for their own right. Some kind of mechanism unfit for survival in the numbed state Thedas finds itself in now.

Andromeda's 'where' the most threatening.

"It is. Yet, every subsequent attempt made to heal that mark, or to seek out your presence within the Fade, even as you slept upon me, is met with barriers. Vast and impenetrable." Though only Wisdom knows this, it is a vexing notion to feel and hear a presence so constant, yet stricken lame with the inability to seek it.

"Barriers…?"

"You’re not aware of them?" This should not be surprising, yet…

"Should I be?" she’s successful in resisting an urge to survey her surroundings, her shoulder twitching with baited movement. "Are they visible to you?" I do not know where to begin with what this question implies.

"They are not made of the material in which Thedas is comprised,” many knew of barriers - they the staple in the combat that enrobes Fereldan. Even the most underdeveloped of mages can perform them. Shifting back into the stiff plush of the chair, we regard each other in silence for a length before she withdraws into discomfort, casting it into her wine. She does not ask again and instead takes to pulling a long drink, grimacing in the aftermath.

Blonde curls drape around sloping shoulders. Now that it splays unbraided, it’s unresting how akin she is to the iconography of Andraste that litters every room of Skyhold.

Andromeda dons no pointed crown despite Varric's jests and wears a gaze too haunting, like many of the traumatized citizens of Ferelden and Orlais, to be Divine. Yet, the similarity between the Chantry’s prophetess and Andromeda’s name, rescue of Mahanon, and affinity for elven kind has not been lost on me - or others - as the rumors now begin to flit in the hallways and in the Herald’s Rest. Andraste and Shartan, to be reunited in their aspects. The massacre of Rethma’nan and the Lyrium purification will only expedite and warp them.

A complication for the Inquisitor to deal with on his own in time.
“You’ve yet to say why you’re sharing this, only now, after two months.” Andromeda’s words are still entwined with dull anger, but with nowhere near the intensity of her earlier reserved fury.

“To inquire your purpose,” a partial truth, even if summarized to be unrecognizable in its current form. “You appear after the fall of Haven at the Inquisitor’s side. Feigning an ignorance while gaining trust of the Inquisitions denizens, you’ve simultaneously garnered attention: mine and other illicit sources. I am lead to ask: If you’ve other allegiances, you must betray them now,” a trained tactician would cut through this simply. But, as suspected, this one is too blinded by such a sudden approach to truly see.

“What?” the open look betrays no one but herself; merely the confusion of someone far too young.

“Are you anyone’s conscript? An agent?”

“You came to ask if I’m a spy?” Andromeda’s newly found wide range of expression now an entire library to peruse.

“However bluntly stated, yes.”

She deadpans, gazing as if I am no longer only Elvhen, but also massive disappointment incarnate. The fire in its last throes blankets down on the light and her face sours in the shadows. After two shakes of her head, she stands to attend the waning hearth.

“A spy,” her voice is clipped, an note higher in a kind of strained annoyance. It’s such a disjointed tone that it’s nearly humorous.

“The first question you ask is ‘are you a spy.’” The low light of the hearth smooths over her profile, her eyes closed. Remaining silent, she turns away. I am also disparaged by this question. Were she someone else, a human in Redcliff or in Denerim or Val Royauex, a sincere approach could, and would have been in earnest. Curiosity, and other desires, sated in benign secrecy.

Instead, she delivered Mahanon alive to an audience, wields strange, wondrous things, and remains hidden within the Fade from even my searching.

Stepping towards the hearth, she stoops to lift a quartered log. Her body has trimmed since being found alongside Mahanon, yet even so remains plentiful. Drawn down the cascades of hair, I choose to pause at the generous curve of her bottom. She folds down onto long legs, the black leather trousers she wears today tight and clinging.

With the wrought iron poker, the wood is carefully placed into the hearth mouth. Returning the poker to its resting place, she remains a few moments more, head lowered and shaking once. An uncomfortable nostalgia rests me from my invasive, and inappropriate, staring - this moment a memory den: to be Elvhen in repose as a quickling restokes the hearth. On her knees, no less.

This an additional tell of ‘otherness’ is her complete lack of understanding in social standings between Humans and Elves. Or their reversal in history.

As she stands, there is a mindfulness around her left forearm. Still wrapped tightly in linen, held straight. Once she’s retaken her seat, one leg folded underneath the other, a sigh, far weightier than someone of her youth would deign, she says “Bluntly stated, no. I’m not a spy.”

Dry yet cheeky, and allowed given circumstances. Bent half forward, she smoothes her finger tips over her brow in irritation.

“Then you permit to a line of questioning?”
“You are the first person to speak with me, Solas, aside from Felix, at a level of comprehension I am accustomed to. I wouldn’t dare turn you away,” she resigns, the oscillation between youth and maturity difficult to track. Dipping my head, I see no point in hiding the satisfaction at this successful hand.

“How many of those devices do you have?” She asks in a gesture toward her throat. “And would it work on me?”

“Only one, to my knowledge, and this one is already attuned to my person,” I say. “This is subject to change. The Inquisitor may seek out similar means eventually,”

“Is that why only you’ve come, then?”

“That is correct,” a lie. “Which is why our meeting is to remain known to only you and I.” Mahanon would be furious; Cassandra’s accusation of duplicity true in a colorful variety of ways, this meeting with Andromeda a mere quarter page to an entire tome.

Pupils dilating, lips pursing, Andromeda flickers in acute inspection that most would twist away under such an overwhelming focus. “Understood.” she cautiously agrees. There is a heaviness that I’d not anticipated. Andromeda seems, presumably, aware that I approach with motive, and who wouldn’t, yet she concedes in respite.

“What of your origins? Those maps are inexplicably foreign; I cannot place them,” This the loaded question - If she is to lie, will it show in her body? Will I remain able to catch it?

What is this veracity of one who evades the scrutiny of someone once regarded for their god-like ability?

“How many planets are in your star system?” Another question unforeseen, though it answers more than what it asks.

“In truth, I do not know how many worlds exist beyond Thedas and the vastness of the Fade,” But oh, how many stories exist. Thedas, the Fade, and The Void are interwoven - the same world, different planes, and the sub-planar pockets connected to them. They should be. The astariums, the few that remain, tell of of Elvhen history with more accuracy than most Dalish tradition. Though the observatories were rarely places I held council, as my own endeavors did not extend to the physical beyond.

“I am also unaware of how many worlds exist beyond the sky’s reach, as that art has been lost to both time and war,” This earns sorrow at this mention of loss, but relinquishes nothing beyond that. The pause that follows, and Andromeda's confused frustration is held against the fire - as if she is uncertain of what should be said next.

"Well," she slips one finger around a curl, smoothing it between thumb and forefinger. “There are eight planets in mine. Only mine is hospitable. There is no system, galaxy, or cluster in which we’d contacted other sentient life and it hasn’t been without trying. Those maps? That’s where I’m from. Most of our lands have been explored, or at least noted. Thedas is not a part of any known landmass,”

Andromeda's hesitant intensity does not align with the greyish murk of the dirtha’gren’s stunted abilities. Nor does the sudden burst of information. A place that should be known while in possession of these words. A blank space - a sphere, a location... A population so numerous that the sensation is that a bed of calmed hornets, ready to be disturbed. Reaching, I am denied more until it is
to be given by her mouth.

I say “Your claim is that you are not of Thedas?”

While it is not overtly ‘I’m from the beyond,’ her words are hesitant, calculated, and still direct in the way one would would fear being mislabeled for lunacy. Fade-touched as most Fereldan's described.

“If a phone filled with two hundred gigabytes of personal data, maps that outline literally every landmass of my planet, proving that light and sound exist in the same spectrum, and that it also moves in wave… If that doesn’t evoke even the slightest curiosity, then I’m at a loss of what to do next,” Slumping in exasperation, she tightly swings her one free leg. Small toes gliding against the stone floor.

“It evokes far more than slight curiosity; I would not be here otherwise,” It is the first relief I’ve allowed myself; a reassurance.

Hands folding and linking one ankle over the other, I take the weight of this admittance and apply it to earlier postulation. With technology beyond any pseudo-modern Thedosian engineer, health in pristine condition save for that piercing, nebulous speak, unique and disconcerting abilities… If only that presence could be accessed within the Fade. Regardless of any personal desire to give in and simply accept what I’ve suspected as certainty, this information pot is too yielding, and doing so would be foolish.

"However, most would describe your claim as a symptom of insanity. As you handle of Trade grows, similar questions will be asked. It will not fare well should you answer the same. Perhaps it would be wise to speak of your origins in a plain manner when prompted by others," to hear someone so readily admit ‘otherness’ would earn a swift burning or beheading, especially Andromeda who teeters on the precipice of shackles.

"I'm speaking as plainly as I can, Solas. I just thought that you..." She gestures with an open palm faced outwards, circling my person " were... already aware? You'd once asked if I was something other than human, so I thought... Ugh. Why else for this... meeting?" she pulls back her hand, fingers curling back into a soft fist. Another swing of her calf before flexing her toes en pointe against the floor. It is a pensive expression - someone who calculates in the midst of their problem, without knowledge of its size.

"The precariousness of your situation calls for it; your affect on the inquisition and it's pursuits,"

"You think I'm here because I want to be?" her eyes narrow, the skin along the bridge of her nose pinching.

"Are you not?"

"Where else would I go? It's been fifty three days and I only just now feel lucid enough to think coherently outside of my journal."

"Fifty three days since you woke?" A blatant bait partially used to see if it would be taken, partially used to ascertain her level of awareness.

As if cued, she pauses, head tilting in a different regard; she now knows this is a bait. In the next moment, there is an sudden emotional withdrawal. "I don't know even know if this conversation even happening. None of any of this makes sense,"

"This is not the Fade if the reassurance is needed." Unfortunately - if it were, there would be no need for such fabrications and intentionally knavish conversations.
"It is also true: little about you makes sense presently," I add. Though the comment had not been said in jest, she laughs. Her huskier octave is bright asudden in a singular 'hah'. A cutting sound, likely a learned trait from Favrun.

"A topic on which we can agree," she says without smiling.

To halt further hesitation on her part, my next question lands “How is it you came to wake on the mountain? I’ve looked within the Fade for you there - you simply appear next to the Inquisitor, disrobe him, and move forward.”

“There is no clean answer- I was in Yellowstone and then… I found Mahanon,” To see someone speak facts and then attempt to lie is akin to being given a skeleton key for an Orlesian estate; somewhere within her statement is an omission. With such an entangled mass of unconnected tethers, in addition to the disconnect of the dirth’a’gren’s abilities, I cannot surmise where. In Andromeda’s consistent compliance and painful inability to remain heated when facing her own mistreatment, pressing for the answer is the easiest path.

“Please speak only the truth,” much of her speech thus far has relied heavily on intonation and so my voice deepens, a mild warning.

Peering down at her hands, her fingers clasp the empty cup “There was a…” She pauses, brows furrowed at whatever memory she sifts through “There was a space in between Yellowstone and here. There was no visible light; I was only conscious enough to know that I was there for an indeterminate amount of time. Then, I was on a mountain and found Mahanon face first in a snowbank,” Mind racing at the subjective description too vague to immediately place, Andromeda intercepts, saying “May I ask you something?”

“You may,” Though this politeness unfamiliar in both tongue and application, I do enjoy it for what little it’s worth. I’d weathered enough of Fereldens to not at surface level appreciate this.

“You, and others, keep mentioning this fade: can you tell me what that is?”

“...Is that a serious question?” All that stands in the face of this obliviousness.

“...Yes?”

“Do you not dream?” I press again, as surely there is a straight answer embedded somewhere.

“Every night, almost. Does dreaming correlate with fade?”

If this pattern is to continue, we will dance around one another, question into question through the break of day, and I will leave just as barren and confused as I had entered. To earn more, a balance must shift. Information freely given when requested no matter the status of the question. With what, and who, seems to be the real Andromeda, unsheathed from immersion and culture shock- the best course is interaction honest at least in tone.

Through these inquiries, the hope is to reveal an untouched pawn from an unused board.

My own interests fed when able.

“The Fade is as plentiful in danger as it is in its wonders; it is imperative you take this request seriously.”
“I do take this seriously, but today has twice proven that my word, no matter in which way I use it, means very little,” Andromeda stands, padding over to the table with near silent footfalls. A light clamor against the table tells of her retiring her wine cup for the night. “Would you like something to drink?” her voice softened from the distance. “I forgot to offer,” Most would.

Inclining with another tilt of the head, I regard massive shift in demeanor with caution but not dislike - we’d largely worked through her intense, incredible observance of the Fade. Refreshingly unencumbered with zero religious reluctance.

Painfully little has been said of her origins after her admittance. Her world which she did not name. The only blatant broadcast she’d given is that she was not of Thedas, and therefore not of the Fade, avoiding the rest as if endangered by her own thoughts. In all fairness, I did not ask of her planet, or much beyond gauging her knowledge of Thedas to assist in understanding.

“The Fade is a metaphysical neuropathically-linked hivemind which is where Thedosian’s dream, but typically not dwarves or those forcibly severed from it. Those cut from this Fade are called Tranquil. The Fade is also home to spirits, like the ones I’ve met so far, who may or may not take… Corporeal form… Which may be depending on the frequency they can generate to interact with matter.” She’s taken to utilizing her hands once more, fingers and wrists gently swaying as if each statement a presentation.

“You claim that my mind must also exist within this hivem-The Fade somewhere as I responded to you once in the your office and my interactions with other Spirits. You also claim that you, and others more aware of their connection to the Fade, hear me emit constant audible frequency against the Veil. The Veil is a kind of sleeve or another kind of barrier that separates organic matter and The Fade.

The Fade is also the energy from which you all draw upon to cast. This casting ranges from the creation and movement of inorganic matter to the vibration of inert gases and molecules to the regrowth of organic matter… Am I understanding everything, at least somewhat?”

What is to be said of one with such aspiration to understand concepts wholly unknown to them when those experienced built walls and ways and chants to deny?

“While there is a certain sterility of process, you’ve greater faculty than most in Skyhold.” Again, another truth. Though there is no reason to reveal it, I am minorly- No, I am impressed.

“I’m sorry, there are so many moving parts, I need to see them individually before rebuilding them. Though, in all this talk of being ‘in, yet not within’ the Fade makes me think of Schrodinger’s Cat.” Blonde hair molten strands, eyes half lidded in a gaze upward.

“A cat…?” the dirtha’gren utterly fails to bring context to this arrangement.

“Schrodinger’s Cat is a thought experiment, pertaining to quantum mechanics which is the study of the incredibly small. Summarized - it’s a probability concept that an item has the possibility to exist and not exist simultaneously when talking hypotheticals. While neuroscience and astrophysics are not within the same hemisphere,” she chuckles to herself, though it falls when she asks “Have you
given thought that perhaps I exist and I do not exist, in tandem, within the Fade?”

I cannot tell if this posed honestly. It is a difference of perspective, so perhaps her observation will provide. “May you elaborate?”

“I'm pretty sure the humans I know, including myself, don't dream in the manner in which you, and others of Thedas do.” flickering, as if wide eyes view constructs that I cannot, she murmurs “Maybe it’s why there’s noise. Friction between them...” No longer lost, her gaze falls. “If... what you've described of the Fade and dreaming, and what little knowledge I've of neurology, it is possible, if also speculative, to exist within a dimension above the Fade. Or outside of it.”

As my brows raise, she back peddles as if to defend the idea, reading something else in my realization. “It’s speculation - this is all subjective until I can figure something out.”

“You mentioned that Mahanon intends to have me chemically alter Lyrium? From Red to Blue? Tomorrow, right?”

“It is likely; the Inquisitor conceded to waiting an evening. The last heard was that the lyrium that returned with us produced remarkably potent draughts. In the dawn of this, the Inquisitor is intending to gild you into his Golden Nug,”

She looses a singular ‘hah’ as the skin crinkles around her nose for the briefest of moments. “I thought we shared resemblance,” she dryly adds to her own denigration.

Chuckling in dissent, “I find I disagree,”

Andromeda smirks, posture near languid from mounting fatigue. In this third hour the hearth burns low. She's fed it twice more since the first. “Has your reverse interrogation been successful?”

I nod once to qualm the surprise both at her acknowledgement of my intent and to confirm that it had been paying at least in theory.

“Rather fruitful - I trust that you are no operative. Though what else you claim remains to be seen,” painfully so. Wisdom will perhaps offer insight, revealing paths I often overlook. Especially in light of Andromeda’s admissions.

“How do we do it, then?” there is a childish readiness as she pulls her legs from underneath herself. No hesitation in this implicitly dangerous trust. I rise in meeting, flexing from the hours of sedation. Intrusive, perhaps cruel in the presence of eagerness, but there is never a time I need to remind myself I've always committed worse. If this is true, a stranger among strangers, then there would be no one better to learn this. My hand would be softer than the Qun’s or the Nightingale’s wrath.

“Much like the Rotunda, though there will be traces remaining to act as a beacon,”

"How exactly do you separate a piece of your magic like that?” is the last thread of permission needed; no harm will come should there be no reason to deliver. Remember ones goals. Do nothing that does not further them.

“Will we speak again?” she asks. It is a hopeful sound that has dithered to babble.

In lifting the dirtha’gren to signify the removal and consequently the loss of comprehension, Andromeda still does not recoil. It is a visual withdrawal, the draining of sincere intensity. A glowing imbuement floats aimlessly within a void where a magical center should be. That thrumming beats
“Good night, Solas,” she speaks in Trade, accent thick. To accommodate the flux of throaty vowels, her voice a pitch higher.

“Rest well, Andromeda,”

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Codex Unlocked!

*Dirtha’gren*

Recorded history does not sprawl as far back to the first meetings between The Children of the Stone and the Elvhen People. For the sake of curiosity and for trade, communication the first step to uniting an agreement. It is possible other trinkets exist, but given the very nature of such a speaking stone, it is attuned to its wearer upon creation. It is thought that the stone disintegrates when the one it is attuned to sheds their casing.

Some say that language, before the Veil, was less constricted. Freer, easier… But even so, some still needed intervention.

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Chapter End Notes

Passivity as a form or survival meet passivity as a form of manipulation.

Another chapter from Fen'Harold; still challenging, especially now that I know which direction to take him. I'd like to think that Andra is working from a slightly negative approval rating.

I should retitle this fic as “all elves are mean”.

Also, expect weird magical items to sprout up, like Dirtha’men’s translator, which is a pre-veil translator. This item, and its origins will be important later.

This chapter is, hopefully, a bit uncomfortable to read. Here he's openly admissible that Andromeda is an unknown, makes observations but no concrete guesses other than “she’s no spy, but still not sure what the hell she is.”

He is dead set on figuring out why and what before the Inquisitor, also. Because of that and Andromeda's own odd behavior, he approaches by anchoring the conversation.
(tactic) so she has to work around him and in her eagerness, simply DOES so, producing an incredibly skewed dynamic. Especially with racial sensitivities at play.

Secondarily, I wanted to play with the concept of intense observation that dithers down into listening without observation from the Narrator, as the Narrator doesn't know what to think themselves. If this seems successful, let me know!

Some time soon, I'll be editing his other chapters to rein in on cohesiveness by supplementing his guesses towards Andra's otherness and his slightly cold approach.

There was also the challenge of writing someone like Solas watching Andra's personality shift in the event of sudden access to straight up communication. Andra is now DESPERATE to understand ANYTHING about her situation and drills Solas for three hours about the Fade so she can apply her understanding. There's also loneliness and speaking to someone in their native tongue for the first time in three months that would be like candy to anyone who lived/died through a cataclysmic event.

So, essentially, Solas Slightly Approves.

Now - to the literary junk. Because Narrator perspective always feels like 'avoid the pronoun' (I think of editing this to Third Person every day ngl) I've sought out several Narrator novels. I've began rereading Contact by Carl Sagan which is a tremendous help in lieu of my own average soft science/math skills. Ellie Arroway, along with Jon Osterman, are partial inspirations for Andra.

The one I needed serious help for is Solas and... even though this sounds kind of weird and likely a little scary, reading Lolita by Vladimir Nabokhov is grounding the affably evil and romantic characterization of Solas I want for this fic.

Speaking of, I'm pretty sure that I will soon return to a couple of the first chapters to fix the mistakes I've made, as well as rewrite one or two of them - there are a few things that I want to handle better, in addition to providing room for character growth. That and fixing inconsistencies and pronoun valley. (Does anyone else cringe reading their first few chapters, or is that just me?)
Super short chapter just to show that what Solas has done (did you catch the imbuement?) will begin to have immediate effect.

I have rewritten/edited a TON of the first few chapters. This chapter will seem as if it is OUT OF NOWHERE without the context of the updates.

Chapters 2-5 have been significantly changed/rewritten if you want to garner some context! Still working on chapters 7-13. I will also be updating the last two chapters soon to add in a couple bits of conversation I had forgotten to include. Ah... Such is writing without a beta. Thank you all for putting up with me.

Also - holy COW; 300 kudos in the 2.5 months I've been writing. Thank you!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 15

∞

Dark Radiation

Laced with a veil in the shape rhombi, each undulating wave scales infinitesimally across the great expanse. They multiply into the millinillions within passing seconds; a slow pace. Spanning further than the concept of travel as solid state matter would know to possibly permit.

This is a space apart.

Interwoven, this black water and a quanta field of bosons intermingle, trapped, and exist within one another - vibrating with incredible magnificence. Yet lacking in ambition. A flaw. Power with no aim. Power derived only from one source. In this replication of a perfect black body, there is no possible discernation that the water and the field were initially separate.

Only I know that they were.

I shouldn’t know.

There should be no ‘I’.

Above lays the landscape of Home.
A land, a view, a memory.

Light pours down from this heavenly figment, rays of great melancholia.

There is a heaviness, as if the body is tied, tethered, to an idea of substance. A promise that fatefully oscillates between positive and negative, forever in flux.

This is a dream.

So high is the surface tension between these essential subatomic particles and the black fluid. So high that it creates a propelling barrier of separation. There is an awareness here, something, somehow…

This body is not solid - my sense of being also an arrangement of subatomic particles meticulously magnetized to remain uniform. Something unknown exists between them… Information… A power. Ever reaching for the will and patience to gather each piece. Weightless like neutrinos barreling through existence without care. Some semblance of shape begins to form.

Two arms… two legs.

Maybe more.

Feet solid enough to plant upon the geometric playground, kaleidoscopic shapes twist below, and into this altered awareness shivers doorway after doorway. These alcoves line the ink of the sky, attached to nothing, save the concept that it is a doorway and should therefore lead into a space.

Some are half-submerged within the black water. Others glow thousands of feet below… Various shapes and widths burrow deep within space, cutting through to deliver secular moments, either of time or of fabrication.

From each threshold pulses light and sound.

Lavender to a poorly tuned piano’s D flat.

    The scent of a match stick’s sulfur.
Cyan to the humming chirp of cicadas.

    The scent of sunlit river stones.
Vermillion to the revving of an engine.

    The scent of fish scales freshly shaved.
Indigo to the twang of a rope taut.

    The scent of chilling fall rain.

Just beyond these doors against the nothing contain moments.

These moments contain me.

This is a dream.
Something grounds this idea… A sense of firmness, a shaping of perception. A transaction allowed this. The body that has been tethered is mine.

Gentle, wet laps are the baseline. The water whines, unstable. The pleasant hum of the earthly figment dims upon command. Here, sight does not rely upon eyes as there is nothing material that will withstand this radiance.

In the distance, thousand upon thousands of miles away, is an edge, a breach against a kind of solid. Two entities clash. Storing potential kinetic energy from each violent embrace. Is one taking on the other? Is one greater than the other? This ocean is smaller, denser… But size and mass are not synchronous.

Perception of time is unattainable here; each step closer to this coupling is simultaneously eons away and five thousand strides a second. Nothing impedes my travel. All matter passes through as if I am also Nothing.

In halting, the space around snaps like thunder, black water and fabric drifting against a membranous window. The black water grows vines like veins, embracing this new connection to this new place.

This is a dream.

This transparent, pulsing membrane billows out as if pressurized against a weighty presence.

Light… real light… bleeds just beyond the curvature of the ocean’s meeting and this new place.

Just beyond is a sky, putrid and verdant. Stones carved and snapped like knives aimlessly whorl without context or home.

A great city made of sharp spires loom in the distance, failing in an ominous presentation. Their attempt at darkness is seen only as a shadowy grey.

Perhaps even glowing when consumed by the carbon backdrop of infinity.

Shocking staves of electrons stab at the ground again and again, the atmosphere filled with nitrogen. Energy in pure, unadulterated forms. Creatures, beings of light and abstraction exist there - unlike here - unlike this carbon collective of me.

Many, millions upon millions hanging form, an ecosystem of life unburdened by flesh and material.

These are of no use to something unfinished. They do not provide sustenance. Melancholia reminds that these should be wanted and needed. There should be a want for everything…

But I can’t use them.

This is a dream.

However.

There are others...

Twisted…

Corrupt…

Impurity…
This planar view quakes, each resound the pleasant reverberation of a bass drum.

The mimic of a heart beat.

The memory of a heart beat.

Just within the distance, beyond that iridescent sheath, is a familiar glowing imbuement.

Closer… It remains unaware. A beacon.

Closer than allowed. Too pure.

It is a brilliant white light, tendrils of jade treading its position. It floats aimlessly where a door should be.

Placing pressure against this potential portal, I aim for that white glow.

This glow belonging to…

*This is a dream.*

I press against this Veil.

I am weak.

I am malformed.

Bolting upright, there is pain and hunger that radiate from the mark. Nothing denotes a change in the puncture's appearance - it remains small and ominously bruised - and as my awareness gains footing, the intensity fades to as it was before; a throb barely present.

“One night… One night of peace is all I ask,” blearily aloud to no one in particular, the words strain against my dry mouth as I reach for my journal. Perhaps it was a mistake to allow Solas to implant ‘magic’ inside… where ever.

The black ocean dream had not been that vivid before.

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**Glossary**

**Dark Radiation** - Dark radiation (also dark electromagnetism) is a postulated type of radiation that mediates interactions of dark matter. This extra degree of freedom could arise from having a non-
trivial amount of dark radiation in the universe. One possible candidate for dark radiation is the sterile neutrino.

**Black Body** - A black body is an idealized physical body that absorbs all incident electromagnetic radiation, regardless of frequency or angle of incidence. A black body in thermal equilibrium (that is, at a constant temperature) emits electromagnetic radiation called black-body radiation. The radiation is emitted according to Planck's law, meaning that it has a spectrum that is determined by the temperature alone, not by the body's shape or composition.

An ideal black body in thermal equilibrium has two notable properties:
- It is an ideal emitter: at every frequency, it emits as much or more thermal radiative energy as any other body at the same temperature.
- It is a diffuse emitter: the energy is radiated isotropically, independent of direction.

Chapter End Notes

Lmao, Zalgo.

Also, the Black City... ;)

I promised you horror and you'll get horror. Eventually.

Going forward, I will also be adding in the Codexes for items I headcanon and research intrinsic to the mechanics of this fic. Thank you, Wikipedia, for the definitions listed! Can't reveal too much, but it would be cool to know what you think of this experimental chapter!

The next chapter is incentivized Andra - FINALLY.
Log - Day 54

What the f**k.

Solas sat on a translator - for - TWO MONTHS.

If it's not strange horrific creatures or my own ineptitude, it's an elf who defies logic!

… ‘Because Aliens’ doesn’t fly here. Even if true.

Need to think of something…

Quanta fields correlate with Fade? What’s it made of?

Plasma? Need to ‘see’ this Fade stuff first.

A lot to approach if… If what was said is actually true...

Will distract from how fucking horrible this entire last week was.

Dream felt different… Very intense.

TO-DO

1. Analyze metals - crystal radio first step to determining if any on the air waves. Crude, but a start. Definitely no radio telescope. In due time.

2. Earphones will be difficult because a MAGNET and CERAMIC is needed; do not want to repurpose current items yet. Need to find ceramicist for ceramic. Galena equivalent? Where the magnets? Do not know if they’ve already created diodes. Unlikely. Would Felix know? How would I ask?

3. Thermometers - have not seen anyone measure temperature. Dolbear’s Law* is an option, but who’s to know the biology of their crickets?! Do they even have crickets? Ugh. start with alcohol thermometer, work from there. Will have to pay a blacksmith to ‘weld’.

4. Spectrophotometer - Still have colorimeter app from last fall’s AST101 on phone… Favrun will know of dyes, so will Araina. Find clear glass, clearer water. Must start understanding the emissions from the sky, as well as the Lyrium. Just light emissions for now.
5. Foldscope - Can remember roughly how to approach making one... Might need to take apart LED flashlight for parts... Batteries? Again, analyzing metals will help in understanding what limits are.

6. NEED SOME DAMNED MAGNETS.

7. What the fuck is Lyrium. Why does my proximity to it affect chemical change? Something to do with sound? How could sound affect it in such a way?

8. Geography compass still doesn’t work. Major dilemma. Can’t even make a simple water compass. Magnets imperative to approaching everything. Birds their main form of communication. Birds rely on… cryptochromes*… I think they were called. Do these birds possess the same? Or? Never realized how much I took magnets for granted.

9. Need to understand the mechanics of Fade Fluid, too. Fade Fluid is a broken, mysterious mechanic that I have zilch understanding of yet. I can't refute Solas' dream escapades immediately; I need to see. It is important to approach this concept as the main path for scientific progress for Thedosians. Whole deck of wild cards. If... If Fade is a real place - dimensional crack-jackpot.

10. Look in Library - Resources on metals. Have they chemists? Have they organized a table of elements yet? Also find resources on their analysis of light and other energies, if they have them. Any resource viable on the Fade, and anything on Lyrium. Biology, too… Because that translator is… Your unnerving good looks only get you so far, Solas.

Feels like someone cramming the cluelessness of undergrad into the crunch of thesis prep. With difficulty scaled to hell-mode. Luxuries of electricity, welding, high powered industry machines... And internet. All non-existent here.

Not even sure how they categorize their libraries. Only been in their library, small, once and only a few days ago. But - even though it'd be slow, it's the only place to potentially start.

In placing my belongings off to the wayside, I shut off the flashlight application. The shuffle out of the thick, sagging mattress is a stiff one. Batting away the moth-bitten canopy once standing.

The hearth has faded to carbonate and potash. All that remains for the senses is the patter of rain and shadows that lurk within the periphery. Shortly after Solas had departed, the impending, pregnant storm unleashed it's anger in my stead. Falling asleep had been easy after the shock had settled. However, after that vivid, anxious dream, a second chance at sleep is not an option.

So, rather than lamenting into empty journal pages or lying awake for hours, this time is better spent focusing. Especially after yesterday. And last night. Both, of which, are absolutely INFURIATING now that there’s been time to reflect. However, fury chances dithering into terror- aside from the grand disaster of yesterday, the entire last had been week a second inauguration into Thedas and the carnage and turmoil it offers.

And subterfuge.

Staying within Skyhold’s walls means submitting to its demands. But leaving, especially now, is a far more dangerous and altogether the last resort. Alone in the wilds is not something I am unfamiliar
with, but it is not the wilderness that pauses. I’ve no idea where to go, little money, no way to
directly communicate… And what else lies beyond Skyhold? We’d already run into mutated murder
machines. A rock and a hard place, in-fucking-deed.

Speaking of which… My fingers brush against the linen bandage, mussed from sleep. Cleaning is
imperative, I’d only the chance to douse it once with water after it had taken place. A thought- using
Crystal Head to clean the area surrounding a good disinfectant, if painful.

Peeling away at the linen around my left forearm, I frown. Deeply.

Clear evidence of the blood let had dried a murky brown against the linen.

However, all that remains of the incision are dried flecks of blood. The incision had been at least an
inch, maybe an inch and a quarter long - the medic clearly had a different perspective on phlebotomy
than I.

But… Running a finger over the dried blood, there is not even a scar to remember the experience by.

“I can’t be…” is said aloud to no one, the linen dressing clenched painfully tight in my right palm.
Falling into the fear trap of whether or not this reality was a drawn out hallucination is not an option
this far in.

I had been cut, this had happened. This is real. I have the stained linen to prove it.

“What if it was that implant? I’ve seen mages regrow bone. What if…” the statement is again said to
no one. Almost on cue, a pulse too strong, too electric, to be a heartbeat bites away at the edges of
that intangible space. As if my entire nervous system were alight with information in a code I could
not process. It fades in less than a second, and that strange want trails shortly after it.

The implant. That could be it. Christ, why did I agree to such a thing? Am I that
desperate?

A moment of deadened thought.

I am alone on a violent planet after losing everything. I am alive only by the mercies of those I
company with.

The answer is yes. I am desperate.

The water in the wash basin is so cold it burns.

In the next few moments, my entire face is dipped within. A scream, long and laced with aching
frustration, follows. The water dulls it’s piercing blow into the world.

Once satisfied and lifting out of the basin, a soft trickle streams back into the reservoir. Screaming
helps, even if marginally.

The next few minutes are spent washing where it matters, braiding and bunning my hair at the top of
my head, and then collecting the remnants of last night’s dinner (leaving a plate to use as a cover for
the waste pot) I gather my journal and my phone.

I’m met with a guard upon the first step outside the room. Not the elven man from last night, but
instead a slumbering human. How he still dozes after my moment with the basin is impressive. His
large body is propped atop a stack of folded linen, chin resting against the pommel of a large, dented
hammer.
He doesn’t rouse from the few moments spent intensely staring.

The next steps taken are intentionally soft - as to not disturb him. In light of this… colorful development with the spirits and the sound and the lyrium, I no longer know what my limits are; it is better to quietly test them than to ask for permission.

After climbing the stairs to the first lower level of the keep, I deposit the tray and bowls in a mostly empty kitchen - only one of the assistant chefs is awake in this early hour.

Borsin, a dwarf with a shaven but stubbly chin, content expression, and thick middle. He blearily stares at a stack of recipes with a steaming cup of tea in hand. An aroma of citrus and sugar permeate the air - pastries. Borsin’s specialty. Ones that tasted like orange and cream, and not a horrible union between onion and toffee or licorice and cream cheese. Given that he is the kitchen’s only occupant means it must be hours before sunrise.

“Andraste’s tits, girl. It’s too early to work,” the chef grouses, nodding only once in the direction of a pile of sweet rolls. He’s perched high on a stool, flush against one of the thick cutting blocks.

“Good morning,” my voice sounds stronger, better, after last night. As I grab a wooden mug, Borsin looks up in the midst of sorting through his stiff, waxed parchment. Fire from the stone ovens light his broad features.

“Did something different with your hair… Preparing to tame more demons today?”

“Demon?” I ask, unfamiliar with the term, though it is often applied near or next to the word ‘spirit’. He chuckles, belly shivering as he rubs away at the sleep still at his eyes. Along the block are the first stages of the pastries, a durem equivalent. His hands and waistcoat dusty just the same.

“Go ahead. Take a sweet roll and go back to bed,” his dismissal is both tired and amused as he returns to his papers.

Plucking two rolls and helping myself to some of the pot of muddy tea, Borsin is left to his early morning rituals and preparation.

Save for one guard that loiters in the main hall with a brightly colored book in hand, there isn’t a movement or sound outside of my own. Given how pure darkness is in areas with no torchlight, I again utilize the flashlight app on its lowest setting. With little desire to run into Solas so soon after last night, despite a needy desire to speak with him more, the quicker, quieter route is taken.

Last night, Solas’ arrival (and that translator, his hostile body language, and the lack of questioning after I’d readily admitted to being, basically, an otherworldly transplant) all read as a warning. Or as close to a warning as he could possibly get.

For my own sake - I need to learn more of Thedas and what my ‘story’ will come to be… and if I should utilize the truth as I always have.

However, Solas is right - if I understood his intent - to continue admitting that I am an alien transplant is perhaps… a bit much. At least at first. How they don’t question the maps or the language I speak, or… Anything, is the true phenomena.

I’d never imagined having to coin an argument for my own extra-terrestrial, inter-dimensional origins. Any and all day dreams concerning had always been that our differences, mine and the other alien party, would be readily known and visible.

Here, my outward construction is similar enough that I am thought of as one of them.
Faint echos and creaks from the hold’s construction are the only sounds bouncing around the open side of the rotunda. The storm outside has lessened to a comfortable downpour; thunder and the occasional bright burst of lightning long since passed. The scent is particularly potent even through the hold’s walls. Ozone, ionized, is both enveloping and damp. I still wonder how I’m able to breathe easily in this atmosphere. Another unanswered phenomenon.

Once through the last threshold, my flashlight carves out a form. A woman sits, posture straight, at an open table.

Her head rises, large eyes glinting green against the dark. Blonde, head half shaved. A sixteen point star, similar to the Star of Vergina, burned into her forehead. She, like Borsin had been in the kitchen, is the sole occupant of the library.

Upon recognizing one another, her luminous gaze lowers back to the massive book cracked open on the table. Pages dimly illuminated only by candle light and a stack of clean parchment to her right, quill in hand. Transcribing?

“Hello. I am Andromeda,” an attempt at beginning conversation before the silence grows too uncomfortable. My communication, and how it’s perceived, is yet another area that needs intensive work. Here is a good opportunity to. If only to seem less threatening.

The woman’s eyes lift again, expression unsettlingly unmoved as I shut off and pocket the phone.

“Hello, Andromeda. I am Avexis.” her tone is clean, each word spoken evenly. The clearest pronunciation heard yet in Thedas. A few moments pass before I awkwardly snap open my journal, tea and two rolls juggled in my free hand.

“Help?” moving forward, I lower my journal to a page of proofs, flipping through a couple to help show what was needed. Anything to help her point in the direction of physics, calculus, trigonometry, or any kind of mathematical tomes. Felix had planted the ideas during the day, Solas had been the one to tend to them in the evening. Any action now is reliant upon me.

“While we do not stock many sources on those subjects, there are a few. Have you not before been in the library?” Avexis speaks just as evenly as she had before, completely devoid of any judgement or negative expression.

“Trade no good.” While I possess a whole host of words, the order in which to use them still boggles. “Help,”

Her large eyes flicker for a moment. For what, I am unsure. However, Avexis rises from the table, saying “I understand.”

Moving round the library’s balcony, Avexis pauses in front of a small alcove “Here. Two shelves dedicated to logic, sacred geometry, and arithmetic. This section is dedicated to the logical sciences, and this one to the earthly. The lowest is dedicated to the four humors.”

“Thank you,” relief wells upon cracking open a dusty book filled with what looks to be mathematical proofs. Flickering through a few more pages, I can see the fine quality of the ink and that it had been all hand-written. Printing presses must not be that common, but the book Solas lent had been printed by one.

“You are most welcome, Andromeda,” she stands between the shelves she’d designated for a moment more. Everything about her sings serene, and with the star scar on her forehead, she must be of the Tranquil Solas mentioned.
While his expression had been dark, bordering on hateful, for the briefest of moments in telling of the process in which a Tranquil was made, Avexis merely seems less emotional than the standard fare of Thedas. Certainly not deformed or stunted. Perhaps… To him, it seemed a form of lobotomy. There needed to be more experience and interaction with a Tranquil on my part before I could offer any kind of perspective.

“Eat?” I offer one of my two pastries after the moment feels to last longer than it should. Avexis regards it, a green glint flickering downward. Another moment and she passively accepts.

“Thank you, Andromeda. I have not eaten in some time and have grown hungry.” in handing her the roll, her finger tips brush mine. This elicits a sudden, harsh pinching in that empty connected space. Attempting to play off the startled reaction, I nod once more in thanks.

Avexis mimics the movement and returns to transcribing at her lone table.

Ignoring the sensation I’d just experienced, as strange senses grow ever consistent, I stuff the remaining roll in my mouth. Residence is taken on the floor on top of two fat pillows. Journal in lap, tea tasting of mud on the floor to cool, I begin to tear into what this place and these people know… If anything to help understand how… this all came to be. How I came to be here.

What I will achieve by doing this? I don’t know - but hopefully some semblance of peace, if anything.

To work through only calculations, and to guess at their completely foreign language still a hurdle; the patterns, as I’d seen them in Felix’s work, still require critical thinking and mapping to apply them to my own approaches.

Hours pass. The sun rises and the cellphone is put away, the sweet roll and tea long since consumed. Pages upon pages upon pages of postulation are made - I’d say that from the books, without dates or publications (What year is it in Thedas?) that Thedas is roughly within the equivalent time frame, mathematically, as around 1,300 to 1,400 AD in Western Europe. Given the state of affairs just this one location was in, it is not surprising.

India, China, and most Islamic countries had fared far better than Western Europe had during this time frame as Western Europe fell into a religious dark age. War and religious intolerance tend to stunt nations. Unfortunately, many advances of Islamic countries were stunted during the Christian crusades 195 years of direct terror between 1091 AD to 1296. Reverberations of Christianity’s tyrannical hypocrisy and were felt for centuries after.

Frowning, the permeation of what religion I could see here in Thedas - Andrastology or Andrastianism or… whatever… sits about as well with me as any religion does.

Which, safely said, is not well.

With potential religious shortcomings aside, Thedas has a lot to cover in terms of understanding the natural order of the material world.

However… The proofs and illustrations for sections I cannot read are incredible and indescribable. With only illustrations to guide the first step, and secondarily picking away at the math laid out before me, I can only guess at the specific intent. It seems that they are far more comfortable with manually exchanging energy and their concept of dimensions are far looser than I could have known to expect…

And so, I’m left wondering...
What had caused these people, prosperous in abilities that defy everything I’d ever known to leave their tangible sciences so far behind? Favrun had mentioned losing her family… Blight, she had called it. A kind of plague? A virus that killed too quickly for their magic to intervene? A virus that resisted magic?

Panicked voices and several pairs of wooden soled shoes rap against the floor. Their quick pace all but destroys the complex, but relaxing, headspace.

“After yesterday’s display in my office, this is not surprising... Her customs and behaviors - we need only to find common ground.” a voice, feminine in nature, enters the library, “Let us hope we find her before the Inquisitor wakes.”

This disembodied voice, laced with worry, speaks more to herself than it does to whoever accompanies. While we’d not often met, I recognize the voice.

“May I be of assistance, Lady Josephine?” Avexis’ calls from around the corner and the sound of her chair sliding signals she must have rose to meet one of the three main advisors.

“Dear Avexis, have you perhaps seen the new conscript Andromeda Delamarq?”

“I have seen an Andromeda. She entered the library several hours ago.”

“Ah!” within seconds, there is a flash of golden silk and woad blue linens. I’d only been in close proximity to Josephine twice. First in meeting her and second only yesterday. While her beauty shines across the warmth of her skin and soft, knowing smiles, here… Up close, she appears haggard wearing a tight frown and oozing a sigh of relief.

“Hello, Josephine,” I say while rising to a stand, legs stiff. At the mention of her name she shifts a side step as two other individuals fall in line behind- one male and one female. The female is human, and is one of whom I’d shared the dormitory with. Cleaned, dark auburn hair coiled at the back of her head in several braids. Surprise is upon her. The male is an elf, bedraggled despite opulent jewelry lining his ears and neck. The dark makeup lining his eyes augments his apparent irritation.

“Miss Delamarq - it is good to find you safe. When your tutors were sent to your new quarters and found you missing… I feared…” She clears her throat and dons a new tone, eyes flitting around for some kind of cue. “If it is yesterday’s incident that bothers you, I offer you apologies in the Inquisitor’s stead. The Inquisitor is still new to his station... and you offer some potential solace. He merely acted in haste.”

The variety of words mean little, but amongst them are safe, Inquisitor, and apology… And so, I nod, slowly.

“If you prefer, you may study in the library, should it be more to your liking.” she motions to the growing stack of books beside the pillows, folding her fingers together delicately, as if nervous.

“Yes,” the answer is tentative as I response to only the gesture of her hand.

“How much Trade does she know?” the male asks, indignant and skeptical as his thin arms fold over his chest, but not before flicking a strand of tawny hair away from his tan face. "I hadn't been informed how underdeveloped her skills were." He wears a long black and violet robe that skims the floor. The woman, Trinde she had called herself, shifts uneasily beside him, her robe far less ornate than the males.

“I boarded with her until recently. She speaks to only a select few freely. Mostly serving elves. No one knew who she was,” the woman turns her head upon thin, pointed shoulders towards the man,
mahogany eyes reluctant “When she disappeared with that hunter a week back, that's when we found out she was the one who saved the Hera-The Inquisitor after Haven fell,” the woman adds, discomfort growing in each of her taut limbs. The elven man’s head snaps forward, glaring at Josephine with his ears flickering low.

“This one?” The male’s head jerks towards the woman, brows high. “What of the rumors about that clan of Dalish? She's just... wandering around?!" his arms rip away from the cross at his chest, hands fisted at his hips, sights set upon Josephine. His irritation shifts into something I can not entirely place.

“Despite whatever rumors you’ve both heard,” Josephine’s words are sweet, but her eyes are pleading. "Miss Delamarq poses no threat that cannot be handled. In addition to your handsome pay - Delamarq possesses a docile, and educated, mannerism. Teaching should not pose too difficult a task for you, I hope."

After a moment, the man sighs. It is a deep, long sound of resignation, shuddering at the tail end. He does not meet my gaze.

“It will not, Lady Montilyet.”

Upon realizing the agenda had changed (once again without my input) to formally learn Trade, I could not, and would not shy away from applying any and every mental faculty I possess. Better late than never.

The first, and grandest, relief was to find just how deep my misunderstandings of their language, or languages, had gone.

There are a total of seven being spoken at any given point within the Hold: Ander, Antivian, Elvhen, Qunlat, Orlesian, Rivaini, and Tevene. With, an eighth rarely being used: Dwarva.

My largest confusion, what had hindered the most, was that Ander, Antivian, Orlesian, Rivaini, and Tevene all sounded to be immediate family members of an already small language family*, Antivian and Orlesian similar enough blend into what could similarly be a dialect continua*.

Until now, I'd also believed them to be a part of Trade - as this population of polyglots spoke with heavy enough accents to limitlessly lead me into ignorance. The fault is mine for not realizing this sooner.

No longer, if lessons continue.

Which, if the instructions from the Ithenas and Trinde were true, they would.

Mentally fatigued, the two tutors agree to dismiss several hours into the evening. Along with two thin stacks of parchment for transcribing the Trade syllabry, something I’ve already started on my own, I gather three books for personal use.

One with archaic understandings of Astronomy still too entwined with trigonometry, one that was incredibly similar to Euclid’s and Nichomachus’ method of geometry, and one that based on the illustrations and the closest to modern physics I could find, possible Fade mechanics… Or at least something similar to.

Ithenas gives a low nod of approval to Trinde before he glides towards the stairwell. Pausing, he looks back just before descending the first step.
“Tomorrow morning,” we meet eyes. Despite his apparent teaching experience, this man does not dissemble for any fake admiration. “Wait in your room to be collected.” And with that, he bounces down the stairs and out of sight.

Morning and wait are clear enough. Got it.

Trinde has transitioned to a table with another woman from the room that we’d boarded together, falling into quiet conversation. I bid farewell with a small wave. She, reluctantly, does the same, sparing whispers to the woman at her side.

Progress; no longer do people stare as if my body is comprised of ghostly material and confusion. Now, there’s the added suspicious and immediate dislike. It’s something, at least.

Light pours up from the first floor of the rotunda; before taking leave, I lean against the railing to look below. The round walls several days ago had been bare, smelling of fresh plaster.

For now, they still remain, save that Solas now stands at the opposite wall, back turned. A plane of fresh plaster over the dried layer his canvas. Wearing only his leggings and a tight, green undershirt, torchlight reflects off the dome of his head. His sharp ears flicker and twitch as he moves. With his overly long body, broad shoulders, and unsettling face - Solas is among the most striking in which I’ve seen of the elves - and they are all striking. I allow myself to stare.

Sinewy arms extend in gentle swathes against the wall, a wide sable brush laying copper strokes-quickly and with dedicated precision. Several sheets of paper line the floor at his feet, the geometric shapes stamped into the wall.

Memories of Atlas discussing methods of fresco flood in. If to compare, this looks to be… Boon… or Buon fresco*… Can’t remember…

There’s a build of unfounded nervousness as Solas pauses in his ministrations, neck beginning to turn towards the weight of being watched.

I take my leave before there’s chance for any exchange, and take measured steps down the stairs into the main hall. Stopping once in the kitchens, having forgotten to eat since the first roll this morning, I snag one of the bland, starchy biscuits before deciding to fully retire. Guards line the walls and thresholds unlike this morning, and this time, each watches with palpable intensity.

Upon nearing the hall in which my quarters lay excluded from all others - there, at the end, Mahanon stands.

In discussion with a few of the shorter, stockier dwarves that stand near, they fail to notice my presence. The thought of running is brief. Instead, I walk forward, shoulder straight. There is no attempt to pretend the displeasure felt upon seeing him.

Halfway, they acknowledge and turn. Mahanon remains aloof as he commits to a full body check, pausing at my arm.

“You seem to have healed quick,” his words are cautious, hinting at callousness, as he reaches out. To touch, to grab… “A certain mage fix you up in private last night?”

I shake my head, shifting away in time to avoid his graze. All attention is placed upon the dwarves unfamiliar. They are larger, tanner, and far more intense than those that occupied Skyhold and this Inquisition. What seems like their best impassive slate reads instead as stoic intimidation.

A red light glances off the their broad edges and along the shoulders and scales of their leather armor.
Light emitting from within my new quarters...

Before Mahanon can add anything, I step inside to inspect, knowing well what would be found. These new, insidious reds are akin to stepping onto a dirty, forgotten street of of De Wallen.

The source is, as suspected, Lyrium. Two massive crates juxtaposed at the foot of the canopied bed. Circling around to meet Mahanon, I find him, and the dwarves in company, under this red glow. Mahanon’s eyes are a gold glare against the scarlet that consumes the rest of him, the claws of his facial tattoo blending into the shadows of his black hair.

“After speaking with my advisers, I will apologize for yesterday.” his words come slow, just as cautious as before. “I am sorry. But, you must understand that my actions, the Inquisition’s actions, are for the people. My people. Your people. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I agree to his gibberish merely to get him to leave. Dangerous, yes, but that’s already been designated.

My agreement unbinds more tension within Mahanon than expected; the hardness dissipates and his shoulders sag. He sighs, eyes softening from a calculating glare to a piercing stare.

“Glad to hear you do,” his words warm as he shifts into a less rigid posture. “I need you to try and purify more; what we brought back from the Arbor Wilds is potent. Moreso than what we’ve received from Orzammar.”

Mahanon gestures to the crates, the dwarves behind him trading nervous glances between one another. Unfazed by his shorter entourage, Mahanon begins to untie a heavy satchel from his utility belt, stalking forward once it’s untethered. Before there’s time to react, Mahanon yanks at my right hand, his palm with the green glow gripping at my wrist to exchange the satchel. The cloth bag sags into my palm, heavy and clinking. The eye contact we share is intense; despite Mahanon being around five foot six, he is quick and wields the strength of someone thrice his size.

“This is for yesterday, and for tonight. Should you be successful, consider this the beginning of a working relationship.” Mahanon releases my hand, though he remains in the same position. “It is likely you do not even know what the whispers have begun to call you…” his chuckle is not a kind sound. “Should this new Shartan’s Chosen decide to work alongside the Herald of Andraste, your aid to Dalish won’t be forgotten.”

With that, he turns to leave, the dwarves close behind. The door is closed behind their exit. A shunting chunk follows.

Locked. They locked the door. A cell, after all. Panic springs, but I quash it with a nervous laugh while staring at the crates of glowing Lyrium. The tutors said they would be in the morning, Mahanon would have to collect the stones eventually, whether they were red or blue.

Solas had warned of this...

At least now I am aware of the limits.

Shifting the cloth sack from one hand to the next, I pull at the drawstring to reveal gold coins. At least three pounds worth.

Adding a Rumplestiltskin to this already delirious narrative is the only plausible next step.

Now I am left in wonder: who plays Rumple?
Dolbear's Law - Dolbear's law states the relationship between the air temperature and the rate at which crickets chirp. It was formulated by Amos Dolbear and published in 1897 in an article called "The Cricket as a Thermometer". Dolbear's observations on the relation between chirp rate and temperature were preceded by an 1881 report by Margarette W. Brooks, although this paper went unnoticed until after Dolbear's publication.

Cryptochromes - Cryptochromes are a class of flavoproteins that are sensitive to blue light. They are found in plants and animals. Cryptochromes are involved in the circadian rhythms of plants and animals, and possibly also in the sensing of magnetic fields in a number of species. The name cryptochrome was proposed as a portmanteau combining the cryptic nature of the photoreceptor, and the cryptogamic organisms on which many blue-light studies were carried out.

Language Family - A language family is a group of languages related through descent from a common ancestral language or parental language, called the proto-language of that family. The term "family" reflects the tree model of language origination in historical linguistics, which makes use of a metaphor comparing languages to people in a biological family tree, or in a subsequent modification, to species in a phylogenetic tree of evolutionary taxonomy.

Dialect Continua - A dialect continuum or dialect chain is a spread of language varieties spoken across some geographical area such that neighbouring varieties differ only slightly, but the differences accumulate over distance so that widely separated varieties are not mutually intelligible

Buon Fresco - Buon Fresco Affresco, Italian for true fresco, is a fresco painting technique in which alkaline-resistant pigments, ground in water, are applied to wet plaster.

I've got some goodies, illustration-wise! I haven't had time to finish the tarot illustration yet, but I'll make sure to include that on future updates!

A slightly better, fleshier portrait/character template of Andra. (thank you, HChom!) The icons below show some of Mahanon's decision-making as inquisitor, among other things!
Another started illustration that's currently in WIP... Haha, I'm queen of WIP lately. This piece is quite a bit further than just the line-art (they're not just floating in white space, I promise, lmao) but the WIP's I have posted are a bit spoiler-y. It's not at ALL how 'The Voidling' will end, but rather a 'best case scenario'. If you want to see the progress thus far and don't really care about spoilers, check it out either on my art tumblr or the voidling tumblr. ;)

![Illustration of Andromeda Delamarq](image)
I have been SO EXCITED to start the rumors - With the editing I've done, and will do, they will trickle in more. ;)

Sorry that my posting schedule got messed up. It's been hectic in the real world. You can probably tell I'm tapped by the nature of this chapter, too! It's been a wild, long month.

I think, from now on, I will try to post two chapters a month. I would love to do one chapter a week, but with spring coming, the outdoors calls! Additionally, I want to try to deliver chapters in their best possible format; sometimes I'd get so excited I'd post without editing a second or third time. Which for me, is absolutely necessary. I think too fast and stream too quickly to not try to read through and edit at least thrice. That will happen with the NEXT chapter... As this one is still a bit rough, haha.

Anyway - Anyone remember Avexus? ;) It's a very subtle nod to how Tranquil, and (headcanon) people who are disabled, are treated in Thedas - WHICH IS NOT WELL.

And finally! Some structure for language! I wanted that to be the reveal and reason why Andra was tripping so much when it came to learning Trade; she didn't know what was trade and what wasn't when listening in on other conversations. Being suddenly immersed into a culture of polyglots and without signs and books and access to education would really stunt progress! But not for much longer... ;)

Also, lmao, Mahanon. *shakes head* Ohhhh, Mahanon.

De Wallen, btw, is the infamous Red Light district in Amsterdam.

Next chapter should be similar to Chapter 4; a resurgence of daily life and interactions but less shell-shocked! Think Sansa if you've ever read ASoIaF: nothing comes easy for that girl.

I am certain most of you are aware that since Andra was plopped into Thedas at about half-way point in the game, and that she will eventually be in a non-canon relationship,
that following the game's plotline has never truly been my goal. Due to the nature of The Voidling and how much lore is going into all of this, I'm leaving in generous amounts of time and space for the Inquisition to do it's thing while word also has time to spread.

However, I will say that some romance dialogue will be repurposed in coming chapters.

;) 

SOME DAY, I'll allow myself to be self-indulgent, but that day is NOT TODAY.
Sorry for the unannounced hiatus! Life grabbed me by the reins. :(  

Deep and everlasting thanks to my Alpha’s and Beta Readers. Chronomancer, Paradigm_F, and FataleMonstrum are all wonderful and are great at pointing me in the right direction.

Log – Day 55

Exceptionally intense.

Again.

Was given five hundred coins.

Funny, money used to solve problems.

What good will it do here?

Focus on something else...

The horizon of that black ocean without limits is ushered away by dust motes suffused in light. I am upright, sitting, even before the last pieces of imagery dissipate.

Sleep had been the only reprieve before, but after yesterday, and even now, there lingers a sense of unfounded, purposeless dread. A persisting emotion after a nightmare immediately forgotten. Not the brightest of ideas to allow my strange, bald acquaintance to place a nondescript ball of... energy... somewhere within, essentially, me.

But – bad and over-eager decisions aside, something had changed within the room: the tone of light is cooler... At the foot of the bed, each chest emanates a brilliant, atmospheric blue..

“Shit,” as Varric had said days before.

So long, De Wallen.

I am fully aware what this represents. What this could turn into... But this is a problem too big, too outside of my experience, to approach immediately.

As far as emissions go: the warm glow, whether it be blue or red, does not seem to be biofluorescence but instead bioluminescence. A natural production of energy rather than the absorption and remission of light. This, however, is typically a trait of fungi or fauna on Earth.
Which ones? Can’t remember the specifics.

Thedas is unpredictable. A willingness to be surprised is necessary; and I will repeat this as many times as needed. Earth and Thedas are not the same, despite their parallels. Of the many instances, such as their magic and rapid regeneration, it is necessary to break down each into a manageable prospect. While my perspective is lacking in certain credibility, being objective isn’t out of reach.

Today’s objective question is: ‘What is Lyrium.’

Secondarily is the effect I seem to have on it. To learn if there are others who possess this kind of ‘unique’ interaction within the lands of Thedas.

Thirdly is why this stone is more precious and consumable when blue. What are the effects when ingested? Why does the blue not cause horrific mutation like the red?

Why does no one, save for dwarves and myself, touch it when unprocessed?

Past knowledge insists that there weren’t many non-living geological substances that naturally emit light without simultaneously also being dangerous. Again, however… Thedas. Observation before assumption.

No way to understand its properties, or the inherent change… yet. This would all be easier if I had pursued a hard-nosed multidisciplinary path of biology, geology, chemistry, anthropology, cosmology, and… Perhaps a smattering of mechanical engineering, blacksmithing, linguistics, sociology, psychology, and- The faces of peers and friends, those within those paths and areas of study start to filter in. I halt.

Lamentations, in their multitudes, are for later. Now, rising out of the deceptively musky mattress, I stretch and survey the room for any other potential changes aside from the Lyrium.

Aside from the Lyrium bouncing from a lower frequency on the light spectra to a higher (What would radiography pick up if pointed at these stones?) nothing seems amiss or moved out of place. A few steps towards the basin: the water within is just as bitterly chill as it was the morning before. Clearer now, refreshed by some unknown chamber maid.

The reflection that stares back tells that another bath is soon needed- I smooth away the curling flyaways and re-braid before washing, letting the mind wander back to the caskets of stone. A quick check - the black puncture, scar, whatever it is, remains. No change.

The un-thunking of locks banishes what remained of the morning’s haze, I am snapped to full awareness.

Mahanon’s tenor is first heard before he is seen: a faint sound woven with threads of excitement. The door swings wide to reveal the puckish man and several dwarves that follow behind. Never a dull morning.

I hide my left arm, unnaturally free from the garish bloodlet, behind myself.

“Creators, you did it!” Each of his strides are drawn long in his confidence, bare soles tapping against the floor. As he nears the crates, the blue of his supposed boon reflects against the swell of his cheek. Some shreds are captured in the crags of his scars, causing them to appear a bruised, mottled color. The dwarves remain silent, their already sturdy bodies stiffening. The deep, weathered lines of their faces twist at the sight of the lyrium.

But it is their eyes that tell the most of their discomfort. Glittering in the dim light of the hall, they
flicker between one another as if a kind of skittish prey.

Not a fan of blue?

Mahanon rounds the bed and moves to deliver several proud claps against my shoulder. Left hand, the one with the green gash. His favored hand.

Today he wears armor, each successive movement a shivering of metal. Ebony hair pulled into into a tight braid: oiled and scented like spice and earth. The smile he wears, while authentic, remains alarmingly sharp and yellow. His alien, kohl-rimmed eyes take in the lyrium once more. The smile fades and his usual wound tension returns.

“The mages in the undercroft tested some of your blood against darkspawn flesh brought from one of the most recent excursions into the Deep Roads,” while awe seems to open his expression wide, it remains unknowable — he pauses to peer at the dwarves that stood motionless, their eyes now cast at the floor as if out of respect or fear.

This seems to be enough to alter Mahanon’s course as he turns back, one shoulder lifting in a half shrug, brow furrowing.

“Perhaps later, when your handle of trade is better. We will be sure to ask, however, when we need more of your blood. It will be less unpleasant next time…”

Instead of squaring off, he instead stands listlessly. This is a change - and a difficult one for him as wrinkles in his brow tell of a far different emotion.

His aim for being so aggressive is something that would likely confuse and elude even if I happened to be fluent in Trade Speak. Perhaps it is tied to the tension that exists between Thedosian humans and the elves. Perhaps it is tied to me being a woman. With so many variables and so few facts, I cannot begin to guess which.

After several moments of sharing the quietly scathing stare, Mahanon releases an overlong exhale, nostrils flaring. He leans heavily to one side, neck craning back, to share words with the dwarves in a quick, clipped tone.

They respond with immediate action. Burly, brick like hands grip at the handles, the wood of their burden creaking in lift.

In a farmer’s carry, they exit just as quickly as they had entered, not a word shared amongst them. Mahanon stays a moment more.

“I am glad that you choose to make this easy on yourself; this alone will keep those addled templars in line, help feed the mages, too. This aids the Inquisition and all that serve it. Do you understand that? That you are helping?”

The tone in which he uses ignites an immediate, and surprising, annoyance. I am reminded of so many men from before - perhaps it is because I am a woman. Even so, I nod.

Mahanon relaxes, if marginally, and delivers one more clap. Again with his left hand.

“Good, good. You’ll do well to keep that mindset. When this is all through, you’ll be free to go, wherever home is for someone soft like you.” His parting words seem to be said in comfort.

They are anything but.
Log – Day 70

9:42 - 4 Guardian

Favrun left today.

Come back alive.

Please.

“I’ll be back early Drakonis. That prim Ithenas has you learning the calendar, yes?”

“Yes,” I nod, piecing together most of what Favrun has stated. “Drakonis. Favrun return.” My handle of Trade is higher pitched and strained, comparatively, than a normal range. However, tightened vocal cords are not the cause of the pained ball striking at the back of my throat.

It is that she intends to leave Skyhold.

For nearly three weeks.

The decision to do so is so sudden - to a place, a city, called Denerim. It didn’t seem far, but these people travel by carriage, foot, and horse. A car ride that would take a few hours takes weeks. The panic hadn’t begun to spread until now.

I am the one to reach for her first, perhaps too quickly, as she gasps before returning the embrace. Her age and skinny arms no indicator of her true strength.

“Be safe,” any embarrassment over fumbling with Trade Speak had dissipated after weeks of studying; I’d learned more than previously realized, but syntax is still a formidable enemy.

There is no quiver to betray how deeply this situation terrifies. Favrun is, and had become someone gravely important. I need her. No one else provides a tether to this place better than she. The Arbor Wilds, as they call them, flood back in patchy, anxious memories. Mutilated faces, mottled grey skin with protruding red growths, and elves torn and strewn, across a ground that begins to blend to a rusty red, the forests falling away to plains-

Four mounds.

I blink it back, hard. Breathing deeply.

The thought of losing her to whatever lies in the wilderness shakes me to the marrow of my bones.

“Please,” I’ve undermined myself as the barest of cracks reveal more than it should to her capable hearing.

“Andra, you are in the wealthiest and most well-armored part of Ferelden; Eshne, Araina, and Idrilla remain... And with your... skill, there hasn’t been a moment with a guard stationed near. Even that crank of an apostate keeps watch. Mostly elves, but one can’t blame you for better judgement.” She winks, still teasing, but a careful edge is there. She squeezes my upper arms, grazes her palm against my cheek one last time before pulling away.

It is a frowning, forlorn sentiment hidden against the soft, buttery wrinkles of her face. The potential meaning pits deeply, burrowing in a place that I can not, would not access, until safe to do so.
The thirtieth day of Cloudreach is painfully far.

There is nothing left but to watch her retreating figure, bulked by armor and several belts of brightly colored poultices.

Favrun, despite her years, remains nimble enough to leap onto the back of one of the carriages with grace. We share one last glance before her coppery haired head disappears behind the wagon’s cover.

Ithenas, an impatient but astute man, dismisses tutoring for the day upon sight of me. There is a subtlety to him despite his impatience. Eyes large and sharp, he rests his pointed chin in his palm, tapered ears flickering back in feigned annoyance.

His real annoyance was showed in other ways, jerky hand movements, rigid pointing. But here, they remain relaxed.

“You look…” He pauses, gathering several nodes of information before saying. “Distracted - To be expected as you are too attached to that crone. Return for lessons tomorrow,”

I grasp lesson and tomorrow. Unwell, which I think is a word for sick. I nod, knowing that if I am ill, it is not in body.

“The day is yours do do with what you will,” it is said coldly, but he is hesitant to trail away, observing our last exchange with some level of care. In the two months spent in Ferelden I’ve learned that elves have many tells. Save for two. Mahanon, being one.

A moment against the balcony over the first floor of the Rotunda reveals Solas bent over his desk, an amorphous, phosphorescent light flowing in and out of some kind of bulky stone contraption. He pauses every other moment to record whatever observations he must be finding upon thick, dry parchment.

It has been two weeks since Rethma’Nan and his dream magnifying… gift. In these last two weeks, he has not yet returned to speak - not even to tell me if he had started searching in this supposed Fade for, laughably, what could be coined as my soul.

As the dreams of the black ocean grow in intensity with each passing day, it is an annoyance that he hadn’t spared the time even to talk once or twice more. I wonder if his decision to remain away is intentional or if I’d imagined the whole thing...

Just as his ears twitch and his head begins to lift, I make for the lengthy walk through the main hall.

Without tutoring for distraction, Favrun’s absence is tangible in a way that I’d never experienced. Even during those last few days before Thedas. Wandering the ground of Skyhold feels like the only viable option that remains - to listen to the voices of others, even if I cannot understand them. It will be good to practice.

There is an orphanage, sparsely inhabited, within the Inquisition. It is tended to by matrons in robes more immaculate than any other item of clothing I’d seen outside of armor. One of these hooded women sighs in exasperation as a tangled head of white shoves forward, the small thing growling in anger.

It is Panenlan, stomping towards me with Rasa bouncing around in his arms, swaddling and sling strung around both him and Rasa like webbing. Through his little, razor-like teeth, Panenlan shouts what seems to be obscenities at the matron, based on the thunderous expression that rends her face into something as equally dark as Panenlan’s.
“Just… take the blighted knife ear somewhere else. At least until he calms down,” the woman spits in anger as she whips around, dismissing herself with a sharp flick of her clothed wrist.

Distraction found.

In the two weeks since their loss, Panenlan and Rasa joined Favrun and I for dinner nearly every night. Some moments harder than others as Rasa, so different in appearance, is a stark reminder of my own.

However, Children happen to be the best teachers as their blunt observations are often without malice.

Panenlan, willful, enjoys being the one to make decisions and be the one in control and so I relinquish that task to him - it is clear that he wouldn’t be returning to his quarters any time soon. With Rasa sequestered against the chest with the sling she’d been discovered in and, grabs fistfuls of my braid and babbles incoherently in the beginning of our wandering.

The market first, Panenlan tells me both words in Trade and in the looser, gentler tongue called Elven. Second are the stables to peer at the beasts of burden they keep - strange, warped, and overly large.

Massive pig like creatures, goat-like elk, brutish horses, and even a few… unidentifiable monstrosities. If the sword shunted through the decayed skull of one told of beastliness.

We stop for Panenlan to wonder at delicate wood carvings left alone on a workbench in the main loft. When he grabs what appears to be an elvish male figure from the table, I am left to fumble with the few gold coins pulled from my growing collection. Unsure how much these creations cost, I leave five. Money… still shaky on that front as others had done the bargaining for me.

Hopefully five is enough.

Shoving the doll into a pocket hidden in his shirt, Panenlan muses aloud: “You need to practice hiding, da’len; you are too easy to see. Even other shems look at you funny!”

Following Panenlan’s gaze, Iron Bull, as massive as he seems observant, leans propped against one of the stone buildings. Arms crossed over a bar and bulging chest. He dips his head in acknowledgement, a subtle movement made grand by the spanse of his horns.

A first - I nod back to reciprocate.

Rasa is the one to dictate the next stop, squawking to signal her hunger. Something I had not considered - being that Rasa clung to wet nurses whenever I chanced upon her outside of the breaking of bread. A meandering detour to the kitchens, a quick hello to Borsin, and an overly milky bowl of what could be the Ferelden equivalent to rice cereal.

It is in this time her sanitary needs are met; for those with magic - the least they could have done was figured out how to create frictionless fabric for the sake of nappies.

Once back in her sling, Panenlan and I make back for our initial starting point on the hold grounds. By the time we’re down the stairs, Rasa’s head is slumped against the back of my shoulder, slumbering fast.

Bull had moved from the station he’d taken before, but the guards loomed in their stations. I am unsurprised by the heavy surveillance sparked these last two weeks as any Earth politician would have bound and shackled their chance at a golden goose.
The image of Mahanon stuffed into a poorly fit suit causes a lilting smirk, however it falls at the image of Gereon Alexius’ liver spotted wrists bruised by iron.

“Hide, yes? Please show,” I say to shake the thought. A toothy grin spreads wide on Panenlan.

“Follow me, dalen!” he pips, rushing forward, towards an open door at the base of another of the battlement towers. Entering it without care, the three of us begin a slow ascent to the top, interspersed with moments where Panenlan instructs how to evade prying eyes.

There are several floors that are near destroyed. Some with holes still being patched by mason mages, others still filled with debris and forgotten belongings. On the last climb to the last story, Panenlan scrambles up the ladder with an “Ooh!” and disappears from sight.

Popping my head into the room, an awkward climb with the added weight of Rasa, Panenlan has haphazardly started his way through piles of strewn books and shards of brick. While a mess, it is manageable. There are molding wooden cupboards, stone shelving built into the walls, various tools, rusted, broken, and scattered.

What is most appealing is the massive port window, carved out in the several feet of stone.

The view is un-obscured by the mountain range and there seems to be little opportunity for light pollution aside from their overly brilliant moons. The rest of the hold to the tower’s back. A ladder to a roof hatch rests off in the opposite end of the one we just scaled.

This space is far better for study than that dank, depressing room in the underbelly of the keep. A good distraction if I can find it nowhere else.

A makeshift observatory.

As an unshackled Lyrium goose, it is important to test the limits.

With no accurate way to tell time, the hours are spent mindlessly shifting the debris and chaos into the floor below, intersected with the needs of the children.

Clean a path to the port window, take Rasa from her sling.

Toss away molded wooden filigree with no paintings or mirrors to fill them, send Panenlan for more food and linen for Rasa.

Sift through the books to save any that have withstood time, break for food and water (More milky grain meal for Rasa and a pastry of meat and berries between Panenlan and I).

Toss small items down into the lower floor, which is beyond help, and then commune poorly with a female guard investigating the noise.

Once her suspicions are assuaged, largely with the guidance of Panenlan, sights move on to the furniture and piles of rotting wood and stone shards. Depositing a once again slumbering Rasa with Panenlan, the larger items start falling. How Rasa sleeps through it all, I am uncertain but thankful.

A chest dilapidated beyond any possible repair, is filled with mildewed cloth and vacant scrolls. Several smashed bookcases. A cistern. A bust of an elven woman, broken in half. Each earns a jeer.

“You’re stronger than you look! Maybe you should be a warrior. I can show you how to do that,
A warrior,” I repeat, tossing the chest down into the first floor with as much care as one could.

“What is?” I ask, a moment later, to Panenlan’s delight. His hand shunts into the air, fingers clasped around the carved figure, and a deluge of babbling follows.

Small chatter, where I repeat his words, persists until Panenlan’s eyes begin to sag, and his stomach begins to rumble. A good stopping point as the room appears… Usable.

As the last slivers of daylight melt into a dewey twilight, the floor largely cleared from broken beams, cabinets, and furniture, it is time to end what feels like a day well spent.

Despite the morning’s rough start.

It takes little time to rouse Panenlan, but much longer to make the trek back. Rasa, ever watchful, coos at the sight of torches being lit by guards and maids alike.

The matrons in charge of caring for the children scowl only slightly at having the newest mouths returned after sundown, and deep within the quarters there stands a wet nurse at work with another of the smaller children. And like that, they are whisked back into their stores.

Panenlan pauses to call back: “Let’s go there again tomorrow; I can show you how to block!”

I nod, only recovering a portion of his sentiment. In turning to leave, there are two figures standing aloft, half covered in shadow. One is Idrilla. The first sighting of her since the first return from the South. She edges closer. Eyes astute, posture relaxed.

A woman walks at Idrilla’s side; another elf. Golden skin, dark hair. Darker eyes. This woman is wide in hips and wears a jumpsuit of colorful braided leathers that dangle at her calves. The barrage of black arrows tattooed around her eyes form an intimidating mask.

Her first action is to watch the two children, who had not seen her approach, be ushered away. She says nothing, but her mask is unapproachably grim.

“Hello, Idrilla. You come back.” I offer after an awkward moment of silence, softening my stance to heed the intensity of the newcomer.

“Still alive; your accent is much better in such a short time. Got a proper teacher from what I heard.” Idrilla’s lips spread in a stoney smile. Her tone, rigid and cautious, is more so in the presence of this other woman.

The torchlight glints off of Idrilla’s freshly shaven scalp, her chestnut skin oiled and fragrant. She turns to speak to the other woman “This is the human that… Helped that day.”

“Hello, I am Andromeda,” Having learned quickly that the shake of hands was not a custom in Thedas, a curt nod is what people seemed to prefer. The golden woman is unreadable so it was the least that could be offered.

“Polite, for a shem… a little strange looking, too. Elf-blooded?” The woman peers up with no hesitation or concern for personal space, as if I am first a creature, secondarily a person. As most do.

“No one knows; she could barely speak when I first took her hunting. Just follows what she’s told. For the most part,”

“Ah, could get used to the tables turning…” the blonde elf dips her head. “Nabridi of clan
The complication of emotions at her name must be readily visible as she continues, this time with less edge.

“I wanted to share thanks - Had you not been with Idrilla, I would have lost everything. I owe you that much. Maybe... A drink? Shems like drinking, right?” Some of the intensity falls off in layers as the newly named Nabridi backtracks.

“Maybe not this Shem,” Idrilla shrugs as her long legs start for the Herald’s Rest, Nabridi at her heel. “With the faces she makes, you’d think she’s drinking piss,”

“That’s because Ferelden ale is piss,” Nabridi groused a moment before throwing a steady gaze over her shoulder, eyes wide and cast in shadow. “Coming?”

The tavern… Is not a place I’d entered during the hours of peak operation. Just a pit stop to deliver food for Favrun or Borsin whenever they had requested. Even in morning, it had smelled of greasy food, burnt wood, shitty beer, and densely packed bodies. Likely triple that now.

Even so…

Several heads turn and brows lift as I set first foot through the door - Less easy to ignore when they’re compounded into one space. A close distance between Idrilla and myself is kept.

Nabridi snorts, leaning in towards Idrilla to say “Acts like a startled Halla,”

“Was worse before - was like that demon that roams the grounds,” Idrilla responds, head swiveling to find an open space, of which there are few. “But you know how humans treat their own. I wouldn’t be surprised if the rumor about her being an escaped sla- Ah, there.”

Idrilla gestures towards her left. A table, close to a back wall, is available and for our choosing. For the first time, the clamor of the Herald’s Rest washes over me in a kind of stupefying moment. Small snippets gouge the senses into acknowledgement. The smell of poorly processed ale, the humid taste of sweat and sawdust, and the many men barking in laughter, are very much real.

Nabridi departs to approach the bar and I am left alone with Idrilla who has already taken seat.

Idrilla, who brings back the memories of her violent injury, the mutant templars, and the many dead torn to pieces. Her shoulder is concealed by the heavy, brown leathers she wears. What must it look like in the few weeks since it had been carved and regrown and left to heal.

“Favrun left today, right?” Idrilla asks in a voice lullingly calm, settling her elbows against the table.

“Yes. Denerim,” The words seem too quiet against the loud backdrop, but Idrilla nods in understanding just the same. However, she leans in close.

“And you work for the Inquisitor now? Churning Lyrium?” The order of the words remain lost, who knows what churning means… But Work… Inquisitor… Lyrium… Idrilla had seen what had taken place almost a month ago - she was aware that my proximity seemed to alter their precious
“Lyrium make blue. Mahanon give gold?” I respond, slowly, gauging Idrilla’s reaction, unsure if I was answering correctly. As her eyes drop to the table, she gives a small nod and slides back into her relaxed position.

Before anything more can be said, Nabridi returns with a clay bottle and wooden cups. No time is wasted, and within seconds an overflowing cup is slid into my hands before any ability to protest.

“Drink up! Nevarran, I think the barmaid said.” Nabridi whips before pouring Idrilla a glass.

While drinking was, again, not preferable before food, this wine is sweeter than any that I’d tasted.

“See? Just need to ask for stuff that isn’t from Ferelden. Much less pissy,” Nabridi says to Idrilla as she inhales an entire cup before pouring another. Her second round to be a slower pace based on the sipping as she takes a seat to my left.

“This table seems to be lacking the skills of a storyteller. Mind if I join you?” A voice wrapped in a wry smile filters close; behind the table stands Varric, a wooden mug secured in one hand, the other resting on his hip.

“Mind telling us your intended business, first, dwarf?” Nabridi asks, eyes narrowing and hackles rising.

“Ah, Nabridi...” Idrilla winces, an expression rare for her calm, unwavering demeanor. “This is Varric Tethras.” Idrilla’s introduction is stiff as she shifts between the two of them in a manner of embarrassment unparalleled.

“You’re more than welcome, Ser Tethras,” Idrilla turns and dips her head low in both a form of welcome and an apology.

From the moment that Idrilla utters Varric’s name, Nabridi’s face falls. The horror of realization slowly blooms the dark red of embarrassment.

“The... Varric... Tethras ?” What had been stern, almost caustic, confidence before, Nabridi now instead croaks: “You look... different... than the portrait on Swords and Shields...” Her sudden, disjointed tonal change followed by a cartoonish crossing of the arms incites a playful warmth. The laughter does not belong only to Varric and Idrilla: it is also mine.

This wine works fast.

Nabridi huffs and repeats “Might as well be different people! The painting is nothing... Had I known!”

“Better looking in the flesh, I hope,” Varric smirks, sliding onto the bench beside Idrilla. It is with dull thump that his stein finds home upon the stained wooden table, providing enough time for Nabridi to recover.

“Ask someone who enjoys the comfort of a man; they might say yes,” Nabridi suddenly clicks back into her quick, sharpness and knocks back her nearly full cup of wine. To Nabridi’s defensive guzzling, Varric looses another hearty chuckle into the rest of the tavern din.

Varric’s head lowers and we meet gazes “How are you doing since Lady Grim left this morning? Heard you goofed off with Wildling and Dandelion all day,”
Lady Grim seemed to be a moniker he had taken for Favrun, though the others are new. The hearth light of the tavern enhances Varric’s dashing appearance, his tawny eyes a coppery gold and mouth set into patience.

Peering into my own drink, the wriggling reflection that stares back largely distorted, I say “I am good."

Varric’s expression is one of acceptance, but not of belief. Our usual exchange.

“If we’d known that shipping your Lady Grim off on a mission was the trick to pulling you out of the shadows, we would’ve had one more pretty face in the Tavern a month sooner. Might’ve avoided the fiasco down south, too.” The calm ebs into apparent fatigue, and subversive remorse. He pauses, eyes cast downward as Idrilla’s had minutes earlier. Once he rises, his sights are set upon Nabridi.

“You are new to the Inquisition.” He takes another pull from his stein “And not under the best circumstances. How you holdin’ up?”

Varric easily dismantles Nabridi’s defenses and asks her of the family she had lost just two weeks prior - thirty some people that I had helped to burn. In her response, she reads as only mildly inconvenienced. No tears, just a sullen nod, not even a joke to laugh in the face of the destruction that she has faced.

The severity of her world rolls off her shoulders… As if the death of so many was a drop in the ocean and therefore inconsequential. As if this overt violence is their, and now my, normal.

It is the new normal.

I drink, deeply, until my cup is empty. Nabridi immediately refills it. As Varric and Idrilla begin a relaxed exchange, a voice pulls my focus away from the table - most of the tavern chatter blends into a lump of noise, but this singular person is supported by roarous laughter.

“Gone for two blinks and when I return to finish carving the Inquisitor, it had vanished! And whoever took the blighted thing left five gold! For a piece barely worth twenty bits!”

Chapter End Notes

So - another quiet chapter that is establishing for OC’s. No horror, not yet. :(

But what do we have in this chapter?
1. Andra’s blood does something to dark spawn flesh.
2. Mahanon’s trying really hard NOT to be an ASS TM
3. Favrun, Andra's crutch, left for Denerim for a 'mystery mission'
4. Andra intentionally seeks out others to avoid being lost in her own head space.
5. Andra is familiar/recognized well enough to wander around the Hold unbothered by guards.
6. NABRIDI, IDRILLA’S LOVER.
7. Andra now has a space to work, when not learning. More Observatory stuff to follow!

Thedosian money - Sovereigns (Gold) , Silvers, Bits (Copper)
Writing a character who isn't remotely motherly but still sympathetic is more difficult than I'd imagined!
Also - writing someone who's odd/morbid humor retreats when feeling vulnerable is also hard.

Next chapter, a little more Ithenas and Trinde, Felix and SCIENCE!, and Avexis and bad news bears.
Armor and the sinewy bodies of sweating men fill the space that Panenlan and I spent cleaning in the past several days. In disrobing, a man’s breastplate glints in the dimmed torchlight. An embossed eye stares out, pierced with a flaming sword. Templars. Not yet red. A fear and expectancy of their violence keeps me ready, on edge. One of them approaches. The others, including the young ginger man from weeks past, lurk in the corners, watchful. Some wear small, simpering grins that breed an immediate sense of unease.

"I cleaned," I say with the swipe of my hand, hard and accusatory, across the room that they had filled. To see the intended purpose for a space to begin to work so quickly snatched away... Anger, true and pitted, begins to build in the base of my jaw and within my shoulders as one of the men laughs. Removing the clasps underneath his pauldrons, he closes the space between us. The smell of him is pungent - enough to wince. Hard work coupled with uncleanliness - and the odd sweetness of Lyrium.

"And for that we thank you, wench. Off with you," he pauses for a moment, dropping the hunk of metal upon a solid wooden crate. “Unless you came for a treat. Then, by all means, do stay...”

It is a sudden, nauseating wave in which the tone of the men changes. Their wandering eyes leave near tactile sensations and it takes tremendous willpower not to snarl and lash out. Why this, these men, bring out hisses of anger when all else before seemed far more dangerous and worthy of it, there is no immediate answer.

With a quick turn, I slide down the ladder to the second floor - splinters digging into my palms from the quick descent. Repeating the motion lands me on the first floor - the wooden soles of new boots clacking against the stone. The echoes of laughter trickle down from the rafters. Shoving the images
of their leering expressions away, I inspect the wooden slivers, like small quills, that jut from my palm.

As the laughter above fades into memory, I use the extraction of each sliver to try to calm the heat that will not subside. Fiercely clinging to the pain to focus some sense of calm, and failing. Of all to feel exploited over. That this be the first to ignite any kind of response! And to be angered when so much has been given already? I am owed nothing! To be angered by this? Where was this during the blood let? Where was this with the red templars?

Another hiss as the last of the slivers of wood hit the cobblestone. Closing a fist around the bubbles of red, I cringe at this suddenly demanding, embarrassing, selfishness. As if it had come from nowhere, or slipped into cracks I’d not known were there.

Movement is the only balm to the heat and tightness that roots beyond my jaw and shoulders and into my stomach and arms. Misplaced anger will do no good. Well placed anger can warrant change - however small.

My legs know to seek Advisor Montilyet before I do. As general consensus suggests - she is head of… everything. Room and board included.

The choice is seeking her out or a temper tantrum in the middle of the merchant stalls. It is entirely bitter, and a dangerously tempting thought, that perhaps such a display will earn the same shackles that Gereon shuffles around in.

Heavy strides causes all within my path to stay at the edge. For once, it feels good to be avoided. The merchants do not turn in passing but watch from the corners of their eyes. Masked Orlesians hug the sides of the bannister as I take the stairs three at a time. At the apex of the climb, my heart pounds in my neck and cheeks - and continues to thud in the march towards the back of the keep. Where Advisor Montilyet’s office resides.

Upon entering the after only one knock, the urgency melts. An all encompassing aroma fills her office - a greenish bitterness. The intensity and nostalgia of it is like an uppercut to the gut and the wind is pulled from me.

“Oh! Miss Delamarq!” the Ambassador exclaims before pausing. “Do you require urgent word?”

Josephine Montilyet stares from over the top of a steaming cup, her expression one of carefully curated surprise. Beside her is an elaborate metal carafe and several intricately gilded ceramics. Everything about her looks complete - as if she harnessed the world around herself. In the attempt to keep hold of the heat that had propelled me up the hold’s steps and into this very office, I close the distance between her desk and I. Each step diminishes that irritation. As I stand before her and the cup of bitter smelling liquid, the anger is all but a passing thought.

Josephine smiles and laughs softly “Would you like some? I would not have taken you for someone to enjoy Antivian coffee,”

Now, with depleted anger reservoirs and heightened sheepishness, I stand stunned by the idea of how it tastes. And too desperate to refuse.

“I sense that you might like to partake, no? Though, I doubt coffee is why you’re here… “ she chuckles, preparing a cup. “Please, Miss Delamarq, do sit. The delegates I was hoping to meet with this afternoon have yet to arrive. And… I do believe we have not yet formally acquainted ourselves outside of orders and requisitions.” Josephine’s cadence is flowing and pure - there is an accent to her Tradespeak - luminous.
Forgive me, truly.” it is impossible to look away from gentle pour - a rich, steaming ribbon of black. “You are still learning the Trademan’s Tongue. Your studies go well, I hope? Your teacher, Ithenas, is spoken of highly for his skills as a tutor,” While there was no prior questioning of her status, it is now fully realized why Josephine Montilyet is in her position and maintains it skillfully. With nothing but charisma and perception, she has dismantled my agenda in less time than it took me to arrive in her office. Her image of power and decadence all supportive of her ability to do so.

“I learn… Well,” I say.

Motioning with a gentle extension of her hand to a large wooden seat pulled close - I sit.

Seated in front of her, my first sip is scrutinized, perhaps heavily. Other than it is as close to coffee as I’ve experienced in Thedas thus far. It is hot, rich - a little viscous - and robust. Like an overly burnt, unsweetened Sumatran. The pause after that first swallow is one of near bliss. Heat from the china burns against my palms, the pricks from the slivers stinging only faintly.

“I cleaned… room.” I say, thinking of the next phrase, clinging to a now dwindling agenda. Josephine fills in the blank space instead.

“Oh! You were the one to empty that wing of the battlements?” she exclaims for a moment before taking another drink and lifting a parchment to dock it with her free hand.

“...Yes. I want… to learn. To study. I cleaned to learn.” I say slowly as to not trip over myself; Josephine’s shoulders slump regardless and she frowns piteously.

“My deepest apologies, Miss Delamarq - Commander Rutherford has asked for more station for his templar initiates”

Pulling a long drink, I nod, mouth full and mind painfully aware of the defeat.

“There are yet unattended quarters within the battlements - some would require more cleaning and repair, however... Would you care to walk and discuss this with me? These meetings have been… extensive and I do find that stretching is a must,”

“Quarters?” I ask, knowing it is another name for room, but one that I struggle with the pronunciation of, “We walk to?”

“Yes, though I am sorry to find that you do not enjoy the library - I had heard otherwise,”

“Library is good. I like it. I need quarters for… Andromeda’s learning.” I gesture towards myself, grappling with Ithenas’ astute teaching and Trinde’s guidance. While connecting each of the sentences is dodgy at best, Josephine reads clever and bright enough to supplement whatever I may be missing.

“Oh, then you must tell me of these studies as we walk!” setting her glass to the saucer with a gentle clink, she rises and the golden satin ripples and flares in the firelight and stoops to pick up a wooden writing board - complete with an unlit candle and a reservoir for ink.

“Lady Josephine,” I begin, as she walks at an even pace, “What is your… job?” Job seems the least appropriate way to address her station as she juggles what an entire team of middle management would struggle to do - and for a religious-political military organization.

“My job,” she begins, speaking clearly and evenly - in a way that lacks the condescension that some use “Is to assist the Inquisition. I talk with many people and ask them for their help. Sometimes because these people owe someone within the Inquisition or because the Inquisition can offer
protection- Oh, how gracious of you!” she steps through the door, and I close it behind us as we continue to walk. The sun catches her ornate silk sleeves and each of her carefully chosen movements translate as effortless.

The exchange between us is small and idle, but welcome. She asks in clean, neat questions - and it is a winning wager that her earlier questionnaire in her office was a way to test my trade ability. There are times in which I am paused and in these moments she speaks of the countries as if they are all united of a sort - most of it is too fast in her fluency, but I listen all the same.

“You must know that your assistance with Lyrium is of great benefit to the Inquisition. of your salary, we can deduct a fee for use of the room - a stipend to compensate for whatever resources you may require.”

Nodding “I will pay for room.” Whether I should be asking how much and when it should be paid I decide to ask that at a later date. Whether it be a control tactic or a privileged convenience, it is still unknown. Perhaps both. Josephine continues her line of gentle, relaxed questioning as we exit the hold and continue into the crisp air of the north side battlements.

“Have you always had this skill to handle tainted lyrium?” There is a bid hidden within Josephine’s abilities as a wordsmith. Regardless, I’m not one to gamble and give into it.

“I do not know Ferelden or Lyrium before,” I shrug and look out across a section of the battlement that had been closed off to public access. “It is new.”

“Interesting. So there was no lyrium in the country you hail from? You must tell me what it was like!”

Solas’ warning floats in, and I nod, not giving into this second bid entirely. “My home… large. Many people. Not same.”

“And what of the mages there?” she asks, the serenity of her expression and the mountainous surroundings belying the feeling that this conversation was a dig for more information - be it a genuine interest in her behalf, or a directive.

“No mages, mages new.” Another dodge.

“No mages?! Surely there must be some? Who assists in transcription? In the building of great architecture?” It is earnestness here, but who is to say if it is meant or if it had been a directive?

“We do all with,” I lift my hand, not remembering the exact word for it, and she looks at me, astounded. “We use many math. Not magic. Not same.” This conversation begs for a fluent and cerebral understanding of culture, language, science, dynamics of power and economy... A conversation that would have been so incredibly satisfying to have. A emptiness and want, one that cannot be confined to loneliness, yearning, or nostalgia, now begins to take the space that all anger had before.

Josephine’s digging eases, and I am thankful for it.

“Your home sounds wildly intriguing - and you say you knew not of Thedas before?” This time, it feels and sounds an honest question.

“No. Thedas… many new.”

“Well... Despite your rather unwarm welcome and and despite the... actions of our Inquisitor, I welcome you to Thedas, Andromeda. I am happy to assist you as a member of the Inquisition.”
Josephine offers, open endedly. Even atop the battlements in the remote wilderness, she wears her stately mask with that of a master's skill.

“Thank you, Lady Montilyet,”

She smiles, and at a tower located directly behind the main keep and largely from view - opens the door. Debris and dust - wood so ancient it's transitioned from rotting into petrification litter the place. Hand sewn tomes and scrolls lay burnt - far more work would go into cleaning this room than the last.

“It is good to let Panelean help?” I ask - given the state of the room and the rotten wooden shelves and ruined scrolls and casks of parchment... Cleaning this would require more work than the last.

Josephine nods “As long as the ward from clan Retheman’an is in your or another elder’s presence, he is allowed to walk along this side of the battlements. I must ask you to not enter the dungeons from this tower. It will be our agreement and I will persuade the Inquisitor to allow this based on your professional demeanor. Aside from Panenlan, there are new tranquil who may be requisitioned to assist you. The ones you initially quartered with - so you may know of them well.” It is ‘Who you quartered with’ and ‘Tranquil’ that have me caught. Her tone expressed no change. An arresting thought.

“You are nice, Lady Montilyet,” is all that I can manage to say.

“I find you enjoyable as well, Miss Delamarq. Please come to me should you ever wish to share a cup of Antivian coffee. So few can appreciate its robust flavor. Perhaps you will share more tales of your homelands?”

“Yes, I will like that.”

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**Extended End Notes:**

I could go into an incredibly lengthy explanation for my absence last year - but that would be quite boring and depressing. Instead - I offer a new chapter. It is short, but proof that I am alive and that Andra’s journey through Thedas continues.

Now, for additional business - The fantastic @paraparadigm - the author of the well known and mythic tale of *The Reluctant Alchemist's Guide to Thedas* - and I have been working with a few others over the past year on a Discord community for artists and writers alike. If you'd like to invest some time on your writing or your artistic endeavors with other creators, please reach out to either ParaParadigm or Othanas on tumblr. We would love to have you.

For those of you who are still here for Andromeda's tale, I give you my deepest thanks. The story isn't done and I am glad that you are here to see it through.

Thank you

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!