

Ex Nihilo

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Ex Nihilo

by [coucheopaque](#)

Summary

I decided to examine the ‘mage life’ because I believe it is not something thoroughly discussed in the depth I'd like to see it done. This story is built up from a developmental perspective of what being a mage means and how the existence of magic affects the Andrastian society. I tried to elaborate on the central characters from an early stage (my lame attempt at a Bildungsroman) so one's individual view of magic can be understood from a personal level. I focused on three major characters to achieve this scope: A mage (*Elizabeth Amell*), a person surrounded by magic brought up without oppressive views on it (*Alexander Hawke*), and someone indoctrinated to chastise magical abilities (*Cullen Rutherford*).

I adopt a rather medieval view of Thedas, meaning that the current concepts of social equality, morals and ethics are not prevalent. The Circles of Magi are not romanticized Hogwarts-like learning centres, but rather abusive institutions like the Residential Schools. Social stigmas, sexism, prejudice, corruption, violence and abuses common of the medieval era are present in this fanfiction, hence trigger warnings will be set at the beginning of each chapter.

Notes

This is my first attempt at writing, hence I would be happy to receive input and critics. This work has had no betas, there are likely several mistakes; feel free to point them out.

If you'd like to understand the meaning behind "*Principium cuius hinc nobis exordia sumet, nullam rem e nihilo gigni divinitus umquam. Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit*", please check this [link](#)

More information about the OCs featured in this work can be found [here](#).

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

Engrams

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: forced/assisted drowning; non-graphic mention of toddler feces; child domestic work; mild hallucination.

The chapter title, [engrams](#) makes reference to these fragments of the characters story which will be, possibly, lost in time.

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

Chapter 01 – Engrams

Soulsisters

Kirkwall – Drakonis, 9:08 Dragon

A crumpled letter which seems to have been carefully smoothed and refolded sits inside a small jewelry box, together with a fancy empty flask of Orlesian perfume and half dozen other folded letters, all bearing the same handwriting.

Dear Revka,

First of all you are my cousin, and I love you. I never meant to sound offensive in *that* sense. I was off guard when Gamlen told me about you and... the elf. I know that Malcolm could bring magic into the family, but still, to mix our blood with that of the elves is... I can almost understand Damion's distrust and *intense* reaction. I mean, I do not approve of his harshness, but... Brothers will be brothers, they will try to look after us, like little girls, even both of us being the eldest; it is within their male nature. But you are more than just my dear cousin: you are my best friend, my chosen sister and despite how much we have hurt each other last time we spoke, I care for you. I know how you feel about me being with an *apostate*, and all the *curse* it can bring onto the Amells, and... You know how I feel about you being with... with that Antivan, well, an *elf*, and all it entails to our bloodline. We both said it clear and loud, but I want -I need- it all to be behind us. You *are* my family, my blood, the sister I have never had...

I wanted you to be the first to know: I am with child now. Regardless of what you may think of Malcolm, this child is first and foremost an Amell, like me, like you. I wish we were both together now, like we always said we would when we used to daydream about becoming mothers at grandpa Dernal's house. If I close my eyes long enough, I can see the both of us waiting until our fathers were off hunting so we could sneak off to the orchard to do our "adult girl talks". Do you remember how we used to swoon over the de Carrac twins during

our family spring soirée? Oh, I miss you, Rev! And I know you miss me too. Regardless of the ways life may do us apart, you will always be my dearest cousin, my play-pretend sister. So let's set our differences behind us. Maybe I can convince mother and father to have me at the state for a visit after the baby is born. I am sure a little one will have them wrapped around in no time. Meanwhile, please be well, Rev.

Love you, cousin.

Lea

Family I

Lothering – Wintermarch, 9:10 Dragon

The last lines... A deep hard breath, as if to inhale some understanding, her eyes closed for a moment, a long blink to digest the news. Steps on the hallway, tired familiar paces. Her eyes deviated from the parchment as she folded the letter carefully, as if not to offend it, her fingers caressing the piece as she curled herself in the fur tightening it around her shoulders, waiting for Malcolm to join her. A kind smile to receive him, her eyes glinting, the firewood illuminating her soft expression as she looked at him. She greeted him with a small smile and a heavy silence.

“Love” he beckoned in a calm voice, approaching her, still dusting the snow off his beard before he bent over to drop a gentle kiss on her lips. “Is the baby asleep?” he continued, waddling himself close to her, setting his arm around her shoulders.

Leandra lugged herself away to give her husband room, nestling her head onto his shoulder. “I nursed him not long ago, he’s just fallen asleep” she informed him in a placid tone, lowering her eyes to the letter in her hands. “I received news from Revka” she stated, her voice slightly lower as she continued “her child was born early Haring, a little girl”. A small pause, Malcolm's hand mildly compressing her shoulder in reassurance “she... the elf has abandoned her and the girl. Gamlen and Damion are set to...” Another pause, her eyes sparkling wet as she tried to seem composed.

He lowered his head, as to encourage his wife, touching her chin to direct her eyes to his. “But she won’t, will she?” he asked in an effort not to sound accusative “after all, it was her choice to keep this child even when her *man* so openly said he never wanted it”. An ounce of rage crawled inside him, suppressed in his tone, still warming his face.

“No! Of course she won’t. But there aren’t many choices... If we... I think maybe... Maybe we...” Leandra’s voice faltered, the sentence contained behind her lips as she consciously tried to ascertain Malcolm's expression. “She has always been like a sister to me, we grew up together, and the girl still is, somehow...”

He cupped her face with both hands now, interrupting the woman. “Love” Malcolm's voice acknowledged in a temperate tone. “This could work out... Your cousin could keep you

company should I need to stay away long, you'd be with family, and I'm sure Alexander will like to have a cousin to grow up with, just like you did" he concluded serene and mellow, not a hint of doubt in his expression.

Leandra lifted her gaze allowing her expression to give away her consternation "When she met him, I could only wish she would be as happy as I was with you" she avowed, her face lit up as a fine smile dawned on her lips "the Guardian month brings good omens after all. I will send word; she can travel during summer and be here before Solace"

Clothesline

Lothering – August, 9:10 Dragon

With one swift whip Revka straightened the large sheet onto the air, drizzling her face with droplets as she tossed the piece of wet fabric over the tense line, "...I still can't believe she just took off without a nod. I mean, we both knew the woman was a harlot, but I would half expected her to stay longer to lick all fat from the bones..." she continued her comment, out loud and honest voices since any gossip monger eavesdropping couldn't make out a word in Kirkwallian.

"In all honesty I feel awful for, at least in part, thinking Gamlen deserved it. Not that I wish ill on my own brother, but so much he thought Malcolm would just desert me and now his woman was the one to vanish on him" Leandra said in a salty voice, half-ashamed and half-satisfied at the sound of her own words, resting the washing bat on her hips, allowing herself a break from spanking the clothes, using the rim of her apron to dry the sweat off her face.

"Do you think he will try to chase her?" Revka's voice was glazed in curiosity, her eyes diverging from the bucket of clothes waiting to be wrung to her cousin.

"Oh, I wouldn't put it past him. Not that he will do so openly, but he will want to find her out, I'm dead sure! If I were to bet, I'd say we could expect a visit from him. That strumpet's Fereldan, he said, so he will want to snoop around" she replied in an amused tone, resting her arm on the posser, feeling tired by the afternoon heat "why did we put so much ash on this clothes, almost two days soaking and I can't beat the dirt out of them..." she complained, more to herself than to Revka, stretching her back, still feeling sore and bothered by the labour.

Ignoring her cousin's complaints Revka kept on her chores, firm and diligent, almost if she felt proud of forcing the water to leave the fabric, accomplished with the sense of authority, imposing tidiness, soothing her mind to focus on the juicy conversation. "Fereldan? Mara is such a Marcher name... What was she doing in Kirkwall?"

"Fereldan! All made of mud and dog hair that one!" Leandra replied, refreshed and revived by the other's interest. "I poked Gamlen here and there, but he didn't quite say anything, but I think she moved there as a girl, with family. A family Gamlen never actually got to lay eyes

on, so we can already imagine what kind..." she added, seeding some thoughts she had had for a time, as she observed the clothesline becoming heavier.

Pseudo

Lothering –Haring, 9:12 Dragon

A carefully folded letter sits inside a book, awaiting to be sent, pressed between white rose petals so it can soak its perfume. The writing is precise and clear, in a beautiful calligraphy without a single misshapen, as if copied out of a previous scrap.

Malcolm,

I hate to have to do this again, but I need you to come home. I know you said you needed to stay three more weeks in Denerin and I know coming and going back and forth is dangerous and expensive, but I am feeling ill again. This is not common pregnancy morning sickness, I feel liable to turn myself inside out at the slightest smell! I can't barely eat anymore because any food odour makes me wretch and heave. Rev has tried every tea and soup and meal you can possibly think of and I am still getting worse and worse each day. I looked at myself in the mirror today and I felt scared; my face is gaunt, robbed of colour, the only volume I still have in my swollen belly. You can't leave me like this! I need you here, to take care of me, this is also *your* child, Malcolm.

I think perhaps my illness is not related to this pregnancy, but to your absence. I know you think with Rev by my side I have mastered being alone, but this is not true. How do you expect me to get used, to understand that you must be away all the time? I feel like my heart becomes a cold fire every time you are gone for too long. I am tired of lying in a bed, sick and ill, getting heavy with *your* child while you are about in these mercenary jobs. Sometimes it becomes very hard for me to believe this is not just adventuring when you know too well I could reach out to my family for support. They might have loathed me for leaving with you, but *my* child, now *my* children, they are still Amells. If only you wouldn't put my well-being above your pride.

At least once I need to know where your heart and priorities lie.

Forever yours,

Lea

Ciao

Lothering – Solace, 9:13 Dragon

Her hand swiped over the crocheted napkin before placing the tea cup atop of it; with a gentle push Revka neared the tray to Leandra, finally sitting beside her. A long solemn silence occupied the room instead of the usual chatter between the two of them; the silence before the storm until Leandra began sobbing again. Revka softly accompanies the cry in wet eyes without shedding, the absence of words protecting both their feelings like a shared blanket.

Malcolm cracked the door slightly open, peaking inside at the two mourning women, but remained outside. Outside like he had always felt when it came to the Amells. Despite never having wished any misfortune on them he was guilty of not feeling touched by their deaths. He had never really exchanged any words with Bethann and if anything of Aristide he could remember only threats and curses ever being directed at him, but the real reason why he could find a place in his heart for grief was not himself, but Leandra. Her suffering during the last months had scarred him like no templar whip ever could. He watched his heavily pregnant wife jiggle guilt and anxiety since the news of her parent's sickness arrived.

He knew many people were perishing with the cholera bouts spreading like wild summer fire in the Marches, but how many of those poor sods could have had a healer shove away their ailment? No, they were not taken by the Blue Death, they were killed by their own pride, by fear of a Maker who didn't free them from the pest. They died of ignorance and lies. They died of the one disease that would yet kill so many: the fear of magic. No one feared it when they took him for a jester to entertain the Orlesian nobility in Threnhold's, because a leashed mage making flowers bloom and changing the colours of the fire on the candles is perfectly good used of "to serve", however a free mage healing the ill was allowing "magic to rule".

Someone very dear once told him in death lied sacrifice, but he could only believe that, ultimately, in death lied justice.

Motherhood

Lothering – Kingsway, 9:13 Dragon

A note written in a very poor handwriting sits on top of a small pile of ten pieces of virgin hemp cloth, carefully folded. It smells of incense and the cloth pile appears to be slightly damp.

My good Revka,

Here is noted the rituals from Sister Geraldine, as I promised you. Her writing is called "The Art of Parenting for the Good Andrastian", and we do not have a copy in the monastery. Maker knows how many times I have already asked for a copy of this treasured work for our Chantry, but you know how limited our resources are these days...

Still, myself and mother Ailis managed to pull our memories together and remembered most of it! It is as it goes:

To purge the body of unwanted magic, before it takes hold of the infant, place leeches on each of the child's limbs, until the leeches are half full. When done, burn the leeches. Be sure not to inhale the smoke. Afterward, wrap the child's limbs in cloth blessed by a Chantry sister.

A child showing signs of magic may be submerged in water until the breath is nearly lost. If magic is still weak within them, it will die before the child. Should the trouble persist beyond reason, certain talismans made by the Formari may suppress the child's skill.

Also, do never let your infant sip elderflower mixed with honey, because it can attract spirits inside the infant, causing magic. If the child has taken even a small sip of this mixture by accident, induce vomit right away or hold the child upside down as much until the infant passes out.

And remember, in case you ever remarry and wish for new children, always avoid conceiving or giving birth in winter. Spirits roam more freely after Firstfall starts (the heathens of the Imperium call it "umbralis" which means "obscure spirits" and "shadow ghosts" in profane their language); and while with child, as you know, always sleep with dried embrium beneath your pillow.

May the Maker bless your heart and guard your child of magic.

Sister Demelza

Again

Lothering – Harvestmere, 9:13 Dragon

A ball of parchment, crumpled in anger sat beside an embroidered tissue, their initials M&L witnessing the woman's muffled sobs as she reached for it once again.

Love,

I am sorry I have to depart once again. I hate to leave you all alone with the little ones, but please understand I do it for us. I don't have much of a choice to fetch us coin rather than putting my *skills* to use away from you. I know you are upset right now, love, but when I had you come with me, I assumed the responsibility to provide for you and our children.

I will not have you beg your brother for coin while I can make us live comfortably, this is beyond me, Leandra. That you even brought it up yet again hurts me. I know the life you were accustomed with, and I understand you would want for our children to experience the same, but I cannot just stand by and play the farmer when you know how much more I can make if I join the guild for just a couple of months.

I will be home for Satinalia, and we will be plentiful. This is not nearly as easy as you think - or accuse me of feeling-, it hurts me when I come home and find my children have blabbered

their first word, or learned to hunt a runaway hen. I miss them, I miss you, and at times I miss even Revka's stew...

Try to remember why we are together, those feelings that seem so long lost in Kirkwall's Hightown... I will try to bring you a gift from the Free Marches, maybe one of those comb and mirror sets you like so much. And please, find solace in the children, in your cousin, not in the Chantry's lies, I hate to feel its poison in your mouth every time I return.

I love you.

Yours,

MH

Cousinhood

Lothering – Cloudbreach, 9:14 Dragon

"See! Told you she gets warm and heavy, it's how I know" she cheered at her own conclusion, observing her cousin hold his baby sister, fondling the squishy content inside the baby girl's wraps, his forehead forming a frown trying to evaluate the weight and temperature of the baby's booty "I guess that's 'cause her poop's kinda liquid, not log poops like we do..." she pondered, narrowing her eyes specialist-like as Alexander wore a queasy expression, his body writhing by thinking of it. The baby girl rehearsed a small laughter which in time turned to a hiccup as her brother had her hanging away from his body.

"Ugh, now she's doing those drool bubbles..." Alec exasperated as he continued to frown in disgust rather unsure why he still held the baby. A full laughter exploded from the hanging girl as she seemed to enjoy the bounce Alexander's revulsion created. Elizabeth watched his distress with amusement, giggles trembling their way up her throat.

"Poor me, 'cuz, see, mom and aunt are teaching me to change them..." her voice bittered, her eyes falling on the floor for a second and bouncing back at her cousin, focusing on his loathing expression. "You really don't wanna see what's inside there! It can be so yellowy it's almost green!", she teased, contorting her face as if she could retrieve the smell inside her nose, pointing at the baby's bun, sitting on the edge of the bed, swinging her feet back and forth.

Alexander stuck a tongue out mimicking a gag at the mention of the diapers content. "I'll put Beth down before she starts fussing and mom thinks we did something", he finally asserted, gently lowering his sister to her crib. Tilting his head he looked at the bay girl for a second, contemplating her smiling and round drool-glossed face. "It must suck to be a baby, now she gets to lay there on her warm poop and laugh about it like an idiot", he pondered as he watched her stretch her chubby and too short arms at him, without a hint of bawling. Good girl Bethany.

Elizabeth observed him with some attention. She could pick up any of the twins quite effortlessly, but to *lay them down*, for some reason, was just so much harder. But not for Alexander. Nothing was ever too hard for him, and at some level she was quite sure of her cousin's invincibility. "I hope Carver is like you when he grows", she let out of her mouth in an aloof tone, as she stood. She walked towards the cribs, now looking at the sleeping boy.

"You mean looks? Cuz his eyes are blue, and dad says Beth will look more like me", Alec asked without much curiosity for the answer, turning his gaze to his brother, slightly uninterested. "Carver's more like aunt, he's sort of pale, and his nose is like this..." he added, making a gesture for the leaner nose shape with one hand "plus his face is weird cause he's got no brows" he added, as if ready to go on pointing oddities on his baby brother.

"No, Alec!" she hissed disapprovingly "that's not what I'm saying... I mean I hope he gets to do all the things, all done well, like climb trees and hit with the slingshot and run very fast...", Elizabeth explained in an excited tone, approaching the crib, looking at the boy asleep. "I wish we were outside playing..." she sighed, paying attention to the pouring rain hitting the window. She was sure it had been raining forever.

Alexander quieted for a second as his cousin's words hit him, his eyes glistening as he looked at his own shoes. His chest felt heavy and warm, like if someone was hugging him tight, almost too tight to breath, but still oddly comforting. A long breath in as he swallowed the pride choking his throat. She was even better than him sometimes, especially at climbing trees. His face began to redden and he focused on the droplets' noise instead, checking for the rain, frowning again, sitting on the lower bed in the bunk. "But aunt now doesn't want you to play with me and the boys outside anymo..."

"I have an idea! I thought of a game!" the girl said abruptly, excitedly, sparkling eyes, her voice too loud -a look at the twins, Carver was still asleep and Bethany, she never got startled. Jumping beside Alec on the bed, her voice was small and smaller as she began to whisper the ultra secret and too amazing plan for the endless fun: "We'll sneak out, I can go alone actually, and then I'll get Chick..." but before she could continue whispering Carver outnoised thunder and rain, louder and more urgent.

Faded

Lothering – Bloomingtide, 9:14 Dragon

As they stopped running, their faces burned red for the effort. Panting, breathing, so happy it tingled, vivid eyes sparkling of victory as they escaped through the corn field together. Elizabeth was the first to give up and throw herself on the dirt, face pillowed by broken branches and leaves left by the croppers, eyes narrowed and then shut not to face the sun. Alexander followed, hands on his knees first, throat still stinging, letting a hint of laughter escape, with some snot that soon reached his sleeve.

"What are we gonna do, Alec? D'you wanna go see the cave? The Erlians said they've seen a whole giant spider head inside, it still had the eyes and everything!" Elizabeth suggested,

spreading herself on the ground, resting her left arm on top of her shut eyes, not to be bothered by the sun, waiting for her cousin's suggestion.

Her words passed him like the wind, his mind sucked back to a memory vortex by the burning in his throat. Her heavy breathing and the constriction in his chest placed him inside the house again. With his breath still not entirely back, rosy cheeks and dry lips he asked "What was your mom doing yesterday evening, before supper? Was it the water thing again?" He asked, as if remembering some matter important enough to pale the possibility of seeing a real giant spider head.

"Ahn?" the girl half sat, face slightly sideways to evade the beans, reopening her eyes and looking at her cousin, a small confusion frown on her forehead. "Before supper?" Not a hint of understanding, still she wouldn't search for an answer when a possible spider head laid not a twenty-minutes-lungs-coughing-run away from them. "Are we seeing the spider head or not?" a more impatient voice asked, as her body finally sat straight.

"Dad was pretty angry, then mom took him outside and they were arguing on the porch 'cause of aunt" Alexander went on insensitively, sitting beside the girl, taking off his left shoe and shaking off a couple of rocklets trapped inside. "I think dad doesn't like your mom sometimes..." he added, in a much older tone than his age would have allowed for. "Was she doing the water thing again, Tess? I know father was yelling something to do with drown..."

"I know..." she let go in a voice so soft it made her body stiff, her eyes falling on the shadow of a tall corn plant. "Mom doesn't like him much either. And that gets me angry because uncle is so nice, he's even nicer to me than he's to Beth..." a note of pride filling her chest and overflowing in her still meek voice. The answer to Alexander's question burned in her throat like water, choking her not to answer.

"But that's cause Beth's too small, she can't do anything. He likes me more than Carver too" he pondered in a quick explanation, trying to focus on the initial question. "He told mom aunt couldn't do *that* to you. Dad was very angry, but mom... She was kinda not..." he added, as if somehow to sparkle his cousin to talk.

A moment of silence as she looked up and glared straight into the sun, feeling the light rape through her eyes in a painful manner, soaking in the agony and the heat. "She bathed me... *that way* ... You know, with my head *in* the tub..." her coy voice echoed distant as if she heard herself through the water, in a sultry suffocating plea.

Alexander fell silent, his eyes incapable of looking away from the girl facing the sun. He had seen glimpses of it before, two or three times, never to the end because his mother would eventually catch him and walk him away. The memory was too clear in his mind: his stomach felt like he'd taken too large gulps of very cold water right after eating hot soup, and an instant urge to hug his cousin took over him. He grasped onto her as if she was pure air.

Elizabeth was still sun frozen at first, and her eyes flooded as a jolt of fear took over: she felt the water crippling through her pants, rising fast while the sun held her gaze. Too afraid to look down, until she broke from it, pushing the ten times bigger cousin which held so tightly even though so softly. "Stop that! I don't wanna! Stop! Stop! Stop!!!" she ordered, rage

walking in circles looking at the dry ground, squeezing her pants to exorcise the water which had never been there.

Alexander could not feel ten times bigger, but small, all too small and his face burned where the fear had slapped him. Quickly he searched strength inside himself to pull his cousin back, his voice sparkling with false enthusiasm and genuine hope “I think we should take a spider eye! One each, so we could have it forever, you and I” he said in a self doubting daring tone, louder than necessary, quickly cleaning his own tears, no time for fear. He stood fast, leaving the fear on the ground, waiting for his cousin to come back to him and to her own self.

Elizabeth slowed down her loops, her despair train on track again, looking lost at the corn field, as if she had come a long way from a strange place. Alec’s voice was so clear cutting through the air, so different from the muffled water ramble which still lingered inside her mind. She as well hated to feel weak and afraid. Small. *Wet* . Pacing around, the fear cannot stick: “We could try and catch some dog berries on the way. If anyone tries to take our spider eyes, we can attack them, you know, like doing the sling thing Frog Mouth does” she suggested three breaths away from her nodding cousin.

Skies

Lothering – August, 9:14 Dragon

Elizabeth mashed once more the pumpkin puree, covering and burying the small pieces of kitchen, her midday eyes tired and hopeless at the orange goo. Bethany kept patiently staring at her cousin, bouncing ever so slightly on her padded bottom. Her brown eyes were large and hungry, and her mouth was projected forward like a little bird waiting to be fed. Carver had impatience sitting on his blue eyes, expectation filling his already opened mouth, bouncing in his chair to an angry agitated music only he could hear, his arms reaching forward while his expression was stern and focused.

Elizabeth dug the spoon into the mush and shovelled a spoonful she carefully brought close to her own lips, blowing gently and bored. Carefully she led the food into the boy's mouth, wide and receptive despite his rejecting expression. As he chewed on the small chicken pieces she proceeded to repeat the scoop for the girl this time. Bethany parted her lips calmly as the food approached, starting some sort of celebration bounce as soon as the flavour filled her.

Carver watched the spoon retreat from his sister and fussed, as if that one should have been for him too. His bright blue eyes had a downhearted expression, of betrayal almost. Soon his mouth was wide enough to swallow the room. As Elizabeth fed him another spoonful, his lips close around it, as if not to let it go. A gentle pull and his soft lips finally release it back. Bethany kept exploring her patience, giggling slightly at her brother's jealousy, her mouth filled with hunger and drool. A lump of chicken in the spoon causes her to clap her chubby hands in anticipation, her thin eyebrows rising in delight as she chews on the meat piece, lips tight so it doesn't escape. Bethany never dropped, threw or scattered her food; each little

portion was sacred and appreciated, and she ate with joy. It was the closest Elizabeth comes to finding her cute.

Carver, on the other hand, has a much more pleasing presence to the older girl, despite his restlessness. His impatient frown was amusing, so much it caused Elizabeth to reach for a piece of bread, and carefully break a small piece to place it in the boy's small hand. There was thankfulness and delight, fulfillment even in his expression. As he guided the bread into his own mouth, leaving behind a trail crumble, making “mmmmm,mmmmm” noises, ignoring the spoon passing over to his sister instead. Carver grinned as the flour pleasure filled his small mouth and his eyes became but slits of blue light. Just like the afternoon sky crippling through the window pane.

A shadow moves outside, like a luscious dark lash in front of the bright blue eye. Alexander runs and laughs and lives with some neighborhood boys under the big willow tree. At least in thought, some part of her runs outside with him. For now she'd try to enjoy Carver's skies.

Weird

Lothering – Justinian, 9:15 Dragon

She had finally quieted down after the fourth pinch. Not out of fear of the fifth one to come (her mother really knew how to tweeze a tiny amount of inner arm skin, perfectly balanced between pain enough to tear the eye but not enough to come out of the mouth) but rather because she started to feel genuinely sleepy. She had some sort of early morning sleepiness still sitting on her left shoulder, and a bit of the grey after-cry type tiredness on the other side, the *weird* feeling of giving up, of *fading* away. Both exhaustions combined weighing her childish head down, her eyes falling on the back of the pew ahead of her. No faces to search for on the knots of the wood, no crawling bug so she could pretend to see a wandering lost king crossing a desert, no funny braid hanging down from a praying head like a dancing snake... Boredom. Sadness? Yes, boredom *is* children's sadness.

She hated going to the chantry, especially when it was such a sunny and warm day... She just needed to be *outside*, *free*, she did not know how to be any other way. It was the right thing to *be*. A mother's speeches were shackles so tight they caused her pain. She could -should!- be barefoot outside, and she could be playing by the lake with Alec; and the the Erlian boys would eat all the good raspberries from the bushes at the back of the mill and only the crooked dry ones would be left for a whole week; such waste of a day to be playing line-up with Chicken and winning so many bets; or better yet, her uncle could spoil her with a too-fast-for-her-mom-to-approve horse ride through the field; so many possible possibilities and she was at the chantry, the one place that smelled of damp old lady armpit on warm days like this. She was so very unhappy for so many many-reasons... none of her cousins had to attend the service. Also kneeling hurt her skinny knee and bad knees are an awful thing for a girl to have (or at least were the kind of 'awful knees' that come from fun, according to her mom's

preaching), she could never get to like the Maker when his Chantry was so boring and then she was going to the void!

The water that flooded her eyes was supposed to be by her feet, at the lake; the red on her arms should be stains on her raspberry-hatted fingers instead; the praying and praising should have been jabbering and laughter. How could something so wrong be right? Why did the Maker have to make every key to salvation so boring? How could she love someone who never showed a soothing face, but only a punitive one? She knew she was going to cry forever in agony, alone and lost in hell, in pain and despair, but she simply could not help thinking, feeling, that her uncle was a much better man than the Maker. If only Andraste had married him instead...

“Crying is never the right thing to do, Tess”, a voice so soothing it shied away her tears whispered inside her heart, like a gentle blow within her, flickering her will. Her dry eyes adjusted to the revered mother blabbering about the right thing to do - *as if she knew anything about it* - and the importance of charity, of sharing rather than accumulating, of detaching from material wealth to achieve heavenly richness, and another bundle of words who became a funny melody. Such a merry tune, the flame of the brazier began to slowly dance to it. She tilted her head and the flame mirrored it, bending over to the side, causing her pain to shut. “You can always have fun *inside* your head, Elizabeth” the voice let her know, so much like a thought she was sure it was her own. Indeed it was *weirdly* fun to control the flame.

It was only when the templars hassled around that the warp around her eyes faded. She realized the discrete commotion as her mother held her hand tight, anchoring her to reality. “Always trust the templars, they are sent by the Maker to protect us” her mother repeated every so often, on the way to and from the Chantry. “If you ever see something *weird* , if anything *weird* happens in the house, you run to the chantry and call the Templars, only they can protect you!”. Like a meal, three times a day and snacks in between she swallowed this *truth* , until its flavour stuck on her tongue.

A look to the side, and her childish eyes clashed with a Templar’s gaze, eyes shining like a cat in the dark through the slit of his helmet. “Don’t be scared, Tess, he is just like a skittish kitty, that’s why he hides under all that metal. If you come too close, he’ll hiss at you, and try to attack you, but don’t worry, he can’t really hurt you, a scratch at most. Don’t be scared. I am here to protect you, I can jump out and snap that *cat* ”. She did not like when the voice was too loud in her head, louder than her own will, so she shook her head shutting her eyes tight in denial, making the voice dizzy inside, quieting it down. That voice was sometimes too *weird* to bear, and she knew deep inside -so deep the voice wouldn’t reach-, that locking her mind to it was the right thing to do. Unlike the revered mother said, some things were not meant to be shared or given away.

Promise

Lothering – Kingsway, 9:15 Dragon

“Then let me see your fingers!” Elizabeth demanded, high pitched in despair, tears blurring her firm gaze, her chest rising frantically as she tried to look firm and convincing, unafraid voice supported by trembling knees.

“Of course I swear, Tess!” Alexander said in a still shaken tone, his eyes open and wide, sweaty palms clenched deep into his pockets. A too thick gulp of saliva swallowed as he stared at his cousin, fists out and naked as he spread his fingers apart, his hands stretched out towards his cousin, in front of his belly: he could be trusted.

Elizabeth analyzed his eyes more than his hands, the sweat running a river on the deep frown between her gaze. Air gushing through her mouth in relief and she finally nodded, some tears escaping her scared eyes, quickly collected with her sleeves, leaving a wet trail on her wrists. Her mouth was still a tiny bit open, as if she needed more air than just her nose would be able to collect. Alec slowly moved forward and hugged his cousin. She felt small in his arms, like a snail that could be crushed if he pressed too hard. It was weird, because she had just been so big and so bold and so brave and so much taller than him inside the cave, when the spider tackled him down and now she had nearly lost her size. He pressed her shoulders very gently, trying not to smash her snailish frame and her body felt feverish, her cheeks burning hot against his.

They stood in silence harboured by the shade of the hill over the cave entrance, until their breathings aligned and the hug dissolved to their arms and then hands. Alec turned her palms up and analysed her hands: they were chubby, her short nails had dark lines of dirt underneath them and her palms were marginally sticky from some fruit she had been munching on the way to their expedition; a couple of scratches here and there, like medals of her adventurous soul, mementos from summer afternoons well spent. There was absolutely nothing different on her hands that he could not see on his own. He brought her hands together close to his face and clammed both around his mouth and nose, inhaling them deeply: the sour of the fruit mix with that of Chicken’s feathers and general dirt; notes of recently cried snot fluctuated later together with moss and a hint of the salty-sweat flavour the spider had on its fur. His nose twitched in disgust and he finally let go of her hands.

“You can’t see anything, nobody can...” Her voice cut the silence, as she collected her own hands to her pockets. “It doesn’t even smell like burn, and it doesn’t get black either” she added, recomposing, pressing the fabric inside her pockets as if to help her remain calm throughout the voicing of that event.

Alexander was still focused on her, as if startled by every little movement his cousin expressed. “I have never seen you d...” his voice was inquisitive and doubtful at the same time, as much as he was fully sure he had never witnessed such prowess before, he needed to know what he could have missed, when his senses could have betrayed him. Elizabeth interrupted him as soon as he began.

“All the times...” She said in a voice smaller than herself. “All of the times I’ve made fire for us... I... did it... I did it like that” she admitted, her words twisting inside of her like a dagger, coming out and cutting their way through her mouth.

He felt confused, and at the same time guilty for making her diminish even more, that bright brave figure disappearing before the cast of his questions. Still, he needed to understand, he

wanted to cope with her and to share it, and carry the fire as well. “Yeah, but it was always with something, like a rock... Not out of the blue! Like you’d get it on hay or something... This time it was just coming out... Out of you!” his fingers intuitively pointed towards her pockets, accusing those hidden hands. His breath slowed, the boy took a minute to hear his own words as if to believe himself for saying them.

As Alexander’s mouth parted she interrupted him again “I want it, Alec, I want it really bad and then it’s there, it’s sort of like spitting... You just want to spit and then drool floods your mouth, it doesn’t really come from somewhere, it’s kinda in you already. But then I can throw it anywhere I want, like spit you see, but with fire” she rationalized as best as she could, a rehearsed speech she had given herself many times before.

“Uhum...” he complied, his eyes lost on her desperate expression; it made sense indeed making magic was like spitting then. He felt like hugging her again, but he could see the snail shell had cracks already, so he refrained himself. “Look... I won’t tell anyone. Not even father, I swear!” he offered her his best reassurance, hugging her with his eyes, no smile, but his lips pressed in a line sharing her insecurity, her fear. Sharing.

She shook her head in acceptance, silently and motionless body retributing his gaze-hug. Her shoulder lifted ever so slightly as she regained her size, “I won’t let it hurt you, Alec, and I’ll use it to save us, just like I did, I promise.”

Water

Lothering – Firstfall, 9:15 Dragon

As soon as her aunt left and closed the bedroom door she knew what would happen. Her mother and aunt always stayed talking as she bathed, mostly because she did it all on her own, except for the occasional “scrub behind your ears” that her mother would order. But sometimes they would be alone, and the door would stand fully shut. As her mother touched the back of her neck her body suddenly went stiff and she could not feel the warmth of the water anymore, just a painful chill down her spine. Her lips tightly pressed together, she couldn’t plead. Her joyful moment was replaced by a carousel of fear going in circles around her mind. She looked up at her mother’s face without a whisper.

“Close your eyes, mom’s here, keep calm... Close your eyes, the Maker is with us, close your eyes you have to trust me...” Her mother’s voice was soft and dry, and her gaze worried and heavy as she lowered the child’s head, slowly submerging her face in the water.

As her head was gently held in, she could feel the paralyzing fear drenching through her whole body, her impulse to hold the air and gasp for it at the same time, her throat closed to hold breath and scream. Once her ears were fully dunk she started to feel the thumping of her heart inside her chest, as if it wanted out. Her nails digging into her palms as if she could collapse inside herself and disappear. Her body moved slowly, despite her effort to remain quiet, each inch of her yearning for air, in desperation. Anguish hurting more so than the burning pain crossing over her.

Her jaw was clenched and the water started to feel like fire after some seconds. She bit her tongue inside her mouth feeling the metallic blood down her throat, letting the pain fill her thoughts to overcome the fear. Her lungs burned for air as if she was about to explode, and her throat ached, held tight by the water. Fear filling her on the inside, where the air should be, sipping through each inch of her, the suffocated muffle of her mother's praying sobs slowly falling behind, slowed and distant.

Scorching water into her, a deep long breath, water running inside her like it owned her as her body collapsed. Darkness enveloping her, a body too hard to breath, and now... soft. The green diffuse light colouring the inside of her eyelids, she knew where she was. At times she wished to never come back, but there was so much water even there. Never at times like this, though. It was always dry when she drowned, like a tempting invitation. Suddenly she was light, like a hawk floating and soaring in the wind. An evergreen and never ending escape, the one place never the same where all reality would obey her will. The floating world like a beacon to this other immutable and painful existence gazed at her, wherever would she roam, the ever watching castle in the distance.

She woke up dry and warm in her bed, the smell of dried embriums filling her lungs and healing the burns. Outside, the dawn tints her window like a bleeding wound. She knew she was back. What is not made of dream, the real is not green, it is red.

Family II

Lothering – Guardian, 9:16 Dragon

Over the vanity a tidily folded note sits beneath a small pouch of coins. The parchment undulated slighted at the spots where the ink smudged ever so little.

Rev,

Please take my tithe to the Chantry, and also *the extra* for the blessed cloths. I will not be able to attend the service again... Ever since Malcolm returned he is very adamant against anything remotely related to the Chantry. But please tell sister Demelza I am keeping my watch for the twins and that I am very thankful for her prayers. Also tell her my husband should be leaving to the capital in a week and I will attend our lady redeemer's novena for the end of Wintersend.

If you have a chance, please go by Miriam and see if she has had the time to dry the embriums for me. I have already settled it with her, so it should be just a pick up. She might have leeches as well, I asked her to have her boys fetch new ones for me, well, you know Malcolm found the ones I had and I had to act as if I had gotten them as a gift for him... Anyways, she luckily should have both embriums and leeches by now, she was dealing with a nasty flu, the poor dear.

Thank you so much!

Sunflowers

Lothering – Bloomingtide, 9:16 Dragon

The afternoon sun tinted the lake into a beautiful mirror, it was such a waste Alec was sick... He was hardly ever sick, as it seemed to be the family's strength, but at times, when her uncle travelled away, it was not uncommon for one or all of them to face a cold and other small ailments. Missing Malcolm's bold and warm presence was still the most painful illness, though.

After helping her mother and aunt with the dishes and putting the twins to nap, she had the sunny afternoon all for herself. A whole bunch of frustrated plans of tree climbing and pig chasing competitions. A waste of a cave exploring opportunity and even more of a warm time, since winter had just vanished on the horizon.

She sat by the lake, on the last stretch of rocks before the cave entry. The smell was slightly odd, a bit rotten and sour, but it did not bother her. It was their secret place, the cave they claimed as theirs, and it was good to contemplate their sovereignty and triumph even if Alec couldn't join her. A hand in her pocket and she found a piece of cheese purposely softened by her body warmth, which proceeded to be carefully blown in order to remove leftover lint before being brought to her teeth.

Everything was so boring without Alec, for a moment she considered going back home and spending some quality time with Chicken. Still the ever growing risk of being called in to help take care of the waking twins or do chores around the house was too big. Watching the water form concentric circles as she concentrated on nibbling the piece of cheese would have to do for that afternoon.

Some small steps, so small they could almost fit Bethany's feet, coming from her... right? As if emerging from the cave, a long pale girl. Not tall, but 'long', her skin a bit undead with traces of red, as if she was at the verge of anger. Or cold. Or a bit of both. Her intriguing yellow eyes were like a dying sun underneath her dark night hair. The two girls eyed each other as a scout wandering an uncharted territory for a long while, until Elizabeth moved her gaze away, looking again at the water, still sitting, unimpressed.

The girl approached the edge of the lake, holding her arms as if slightly cold. "That, the circles on the water, were you doing them?" Her voice was husky, a hint of hidden shyness punching through the curiosity. Sultry, beautiful, foreigner.

A bite on the rubbery cheese, and then she looked at the girl. She seemed both fragile and strong, and something about her smelled like Alec, she felt like swallowing blood after being punched, but it was not at all bad, because the fight had been won. "Your eyes look like sunflowers, they're sort of yellow, and then dark in the middle", she pointed, because perhaps explaining the circles on the water was not something she would like to do.

“I can... I...” Broken, not only her sentence, but the thoughts. “My eyes?” A pinch of despair, or something like despair, a crisp in the throat and a fuzzy warmth on the stomach. “Your eyes are too dark” she said not knowing how to register the remark. That girl was not afraid: of the circles on the water. Nor of her. Or of saying she liked her eyes. She was sitting with a disgusting blob of cheese in her hands, bored and naive, and yet she looked so brave. Or braved by something. “My name is Morrigan” she had to add, mimicking that bravery.

“I am Elizabeth Amell” she let the words come out naturally, without hesitation, a steady hand guiding the remaining cheese into her greasy lips. “I haven’t seen you before. Do you live here now?” The inquiry was genuine, and perhaps proper of two children interacting, yet something seemed odd, as if the new girl was not quite as much of a child. The cold around her was that of many winters, it seemed.

No! Not something the stranger could say. Morrigan was not supposed to. Still a piece of her seemed to run to the other girl, a brave kin soul. “I can make the circles too” came out in a bold tone, as she proceeded to grow a frown on her pale forehead to bend the surface of the water before the too dark pair of eyes, which now glistened seeing the circles form.

“Andraste’s left nipple!” Elizabeth gasped, shutting her mouth with the entire last bit of cheese, looking now at the girl, and then back at the lake and once more to the girl. “Does your mother know? Does she put your head under water too?” in between teeth-smashed cheese and widened eyes the words popped out, from one edge to the other, from the power and the fun to the fear and the punishment.

“My... mother?! ...No! She doesn’t put my... head... in the water, no” the ivory girl answered, still trying to cope with the information on the question, as if sense was not at all present. “Your mother doesn’t like that you can do *magic* ?” Morrigan asked, a bit moped by the possibility of someone not realizing a gift she was taught to treasure.

Magic. The word hit her in the face. Of course Elizabeth had heard it before, in the mouth of almost every mother during Chantry service. The *curse* . The *plague* . The *shame* . The *sin* . The word was also there, despite the disguise sounds used for it, at shouts that came through the walls like whispers whenever there was a fight in her house. The word was also in her mother’s prayers and nightmares. But for the first time, the word was in her mouth as well: “Magic...” a flooded flake of a voice ripped the silence. Her eyes searched for the sun, she wanted to burn before she could drown. A cold hug kept her warm through the rising water. Elizabeth looked at the girl in the eyes: sunflowers.

Neither could understand that hug, unexpected touch of more than just two bodies. Kinship. Not like Alec, or anyone else. Not like a wolf’s hug, or anything else. They exchanged, in silence, what the other had been missing without knowing.

So I went elbows deep in the Amell family story and did some mix and match of my own. For anyone wondering yes, the cave in the story is the same one past the mill somewhat behind Dane's refuge where you fight a giant spider in Origins. The woman who provides Leandra with dry embriums and leeches is the same lady you find in Origins close to Sten's cage who's making potions to help the refugees and the same who exchanges correspondences with Leandra in DA II (A Letter from Lothering). Mother Ailis is my Stolen Throne cameo just because it's my favourite DA Novel. The line "darkness enveloping her, a body too hard to breath, and now... soft" was shamelessly stolen from Cole when you visit a flooded cave in Old Crestwood with him. I decided to go with a "wet and green" Fade for Elizabeth given her experiences with magic as a child. In my headcanon the Fade is a unique experience to each individual, so as far as sensations go, each one experiences one 'reality' while in the Fade.

Dual

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: mention of spiders, starving child, child beating, emotional hurt, hallucination.

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

The Sun and The Shiver

Bloomingtide, 9:16 Dragon

Elizabeth was quick in raising the brim of her dress, folding the creases together and stuffing the bundle into her mouth, so she could free her hands. Sweaty fingers searching the elastic waistband of her underwear as she started pulling the two baby blankets that had her heavy bellied as they left home. She threw one at Alec, wagging the other up in the air to smooth the creases, wide eyes marveling at the beautiful and warm cloth flying free against the sunny afternoon sky.

Alexander was quick in adjusting the small quilt around his shoulder, no time for unwrinkling his formidable cape, being a hero is a constant haste. His clumsy fingers tied up the knots and he raised his wooden sword high observing his cousin's perfectionist patience "Com'on Tess, I wanna knight you, blanket's already flat", his tone in a hurried protest. His arm untiring to hold his myth and legend upwards thanks to the help of the other hand support on his elbow.

"I'm sticky" Elizabeth informed, tucking the baby quilt inside her collar, finally metamorphosing it into a cape. The end of winter-thick dress was more than enough to make such a runny child sweaty, but her mother always insisted and showed her love and care with an extra layer of elaborated knitwear; this time a vest has caused her sweat glaziness. "Done!" she said out loud in excitement as she knelt, waiting for her cousin's sword to knight her up to his champion world.

A wide smile spread through Alec's raspberry-red lips. "I, Alec, son of Malcolm, knight you oh warrior Tessie. Welcome to the order of the Caped Knights", solemn and somber his voice struggled to sound low and omnipotent, his hands guiding the wooden sword from one shoulder to the other faster and more times than necessary.

Elizabeth's eyes shined like pebbles washed by a quick creek, her igniting smile soon turned into laughter as she heard the final words, a hand trying to hold in giggles not to upset her cousin. The truth, however, was never something she was able to swallow: "What an awful name, Alec! All knights have capes, duh!"

Defeated, Alexander slumped on the floor, arms crossing in denial, unhappy brows trying to hold one another. "What are we called then?" his voice crumpled but still defiant, doubting

his cousin had any better idea, his gaze on the tip of his sword, that now poked the grass on the ground.

Elizabeth sat beside, not an ounce of apology or commiseration in her eyes. Alexander, she knew, was a fighter; no matter whether he had fallen or gotten knocked, he'd never stay down. He needed no pity and she admired that about him. His kingship and confidence did not come from his home with a comfortable bed and food plentitude; it was not even from his loving father. It belonged to himself alone, it was within who he was.

Elizabeth's gaze alone mended him, his mind empowered by the silent adoration. "We're the Champions of the Spider Order", he declared in a snap, sovereign again. "We killed the spider, and we claimed the cave, so Champions of the Spider!", he reaffirmed, marveled at his own creativity.

"Now I like it! Oh, actually you could be the Champion Knight, and I, I could be the Enchanter of Spiders, like you lead the army of soldiers to conquer lands and defend the cave, and I lead an army of giant spiders". No pause, not one single breath until the mind is emptied of ideas so bright they shine through the eyes. A sleeve drying up her forehead as the summer-to-be afternoon kept the girl feverish.

Alexander stood fast, supported by his sword, his voice rising with him "Hell yeah! You could have spiders of all sizes, the small one to crawl inside the enemy soldiers boots!", his excited booted feet stomping brashly pretending a fear that wasn't his, giggles escaping his fruit-tint lips.

The sun crossed the sky from one side to the other as the two of them played and conquered. A dash of mud recoloring in earthy tones one of the baby blankets, bursts of raspberries bitten too hungrily spotting the other quilt. Laughs and playful shouts make kids with jaws strong enough to bite the world.

Finally the day time heat began to evaporate along with the last rays of sun. Knightly capes could no longer shield their childish body from both the shivers of the end of the day and the shivers of going home.

The Son and The Father

Justinian, 9:16 Dragon

His seven-year-old fists were clenched as he walked, kicking a pebble on his way, his lips pressed into an antagonized hard line. "The cart was her idea, dad, you gotta do something!" he said a fourth time, waiting for common sense to reach as up as his father's head. "It's unfair she doesn't get to be here! You gotta have her out too!" he insisted, a stronger and darker pitch reaching out of his mouth.

Malcolm stopped, his face wearing the best smile he could offer. A hand on his son's shoulder, he analysed the boy's eyes for a second and his chest filled. It was never only love

with Alexander; pride was always present. “Look, how about the two of us just build two carts? I’ll find a way to sneak her out tomorrow and then you two get to play races, what d’you think?” he offered, his voice humbled by his son’s request.

The boy inhaled deeply, and kicked the pebble away, turning his eyes to his father. “Why can’t they let her do all the nice things? Mom says she needs to learn how to take care of Beth n’ Carver, and do boring things in the house so she can marry one day. And then they always make her wear dresses and it bugs her when she runs and it’s super bad for climbing...” He let it all out with one breath, and before his father could give him an explanation he would surely refuse, he continued “Boys don’t like girls like that! They’re stupid! And boring! And useless! Mom and aunt, they don’t know what’s nice for a girl. Scuffed knees are awesome and I like her tangled hair better than when she combs it up for the Chantry. I thi...”

His father interrupted his spur by gently pressing his shoulder, collecting the boy’s gaze to himself. “Complaining won’t get us Tess, son. What we’ll do is make up the carts, and then for tomorrow, if it’s not raining, I promise to get her out to play, ok? I know you’re upset, but we’ll make her a surprise with two carts, and tomorrow when you get to play, you can do a race! She loves bets, I’m sure she’ll like it even better to have two carts instead of one.” Malcolm pondered, as much to himself as to his child; he needed to believe that argument more than Alexander did. He wore a smile, as if he still had plenty of those in his pocket, always ready to set one on his lips.

Alec shrugged, his unsatisfied brows reaching for one another. His legs moved forward, towards the barn, and his hands were ready to embrace the building task, but his mind lingered. “I don’t ever want to marry a girl like mom! Or like aunt! My wife will know how to climb all the trees and she’ll fight! She’ll even have a cool scar on her face, like this!” his voice filled with enthusiasm as his hands reached the side of his jaw, tracing the badge of courage his mind could already see. “She’s got it fighting a wolf! No! Fighting a bear! No! No bear, she’s got it hunting a dragon!”

Malcolm had to let a laugh out, in notes of amusement and a hint of sadness. “Oh will she? And how will she hunt the dragon? Will she have powers or what?” he inquired, watching the boy glow as he kept on explaining, somewhat letting himself go a little on that fantasy for some conscious deep reason imagining the woman as a fellow mage.

“No, she’ll fight with a sword, a huge one, the size of her legs, and she will be tall, tall like a boy! And she’ll never use stupid dresses! I’ll buy only breeches for her!” He added most enthusiastically, almost seeing her face emerging to his sight, her sparkling dark eyes, just like his own, and the tougher gaze a girl could ever have. She would not be his girl, she would be his kin, fierce soul that would tame his wild heart.

“Well, I guess you’d better be good at cart races to impress her then, girls who wear breeches want the most daring of all devils, kid!” Malcolm said in an amused voice, his eyes searching for the tools, kept busy not to search his memories for his breeched remembrance long scaped.

Alexander’s head tilted, as a dozen more years weighted on his shoulder, watching his father. “What are you thinking about, dad?” the boy’s voice came out transparent with childish

curiosity as he saw the adult's eyes wander idle through the barn.

“Ahn?” Alec's questioning handed back the reins of his mind to himself and he placed another smile on his lips. “It was just an old *Orlesian song*, son. But not as beautiful as the ones your mother sings...” he added in a kind voice, a hint of gratitude gleaming from his expression. “Get me the bucksaw, will you Alec” he asked completely inside himself again; a good boy to his good girl.

The Cage and The Freedom

Solace, 9:16 Dragon

On the top of the things she loved, right below climbing trees and winning bets, was to be sent on errands. There was something about it that made it even more magical than playing. It had all the thrills and chills of gamboling around with her cousin and the Erlians, but also kept her from trouble and the rod; on the contrary, at times it would make her rip a praise here and there from her mother and aunt. But above all, it filled her mouth with a taste of freedom and granted adulthood. She felt important, capable, reliable with every minor mission she was sent on.

On the roster for the day she was to bring home five (or seven, she already couldn't remember, but all was written down on the note cuddling with a peach in her pocket) bags of tea and a bushel of dried embriums to be picked at lady Miriam's. Meaning she would enjoy the loganberries on the way to the mill and luckily pears if that big old pear tree on the other side of the bridge wasn't already picked clean. Oh! Also there were always many dogs and cats and goats and lambs and chicken and at times even cows she could pet. The legions of fur -and feathery- bellies and backs to rub made her smile all the way, showing the villagers her loganberries stain teeth.

The best thing of the noon time was that most people were inside eating dinner, so she could roam free around as she pleased. The down side being her shadow, that was all too small for her to play any games with it as she walked. Still, walking about with a task was awesome enough to keep her grinning from ear to ear all the way.

It was in a cart, stationed near the Tavern's field that she saw something that flooded her eyes: A cage, all too claustrophobic and small, holding about two dozens of wrens, squeezing even tighter against each other in fear. There was heat on her face as the water escaped her eyes. Around the birds, many smaller cages, all thrown around, some more detailed than others. Her eyes scouted around, blurred motion.

A swift hand snatched the small door open. The birds, paralyzed in fear of the intrusive hand still offered her their beautiful and sad song. They reminded her of her uncle scraping on the sandalwood bark and how the axe would be scented after hurting the tree. A purpleish finger as a soft and warm perch and the bravest of all the wrens hopped in. A cupping hand followed, making sure no little head would bump into the cage's open door, and the small singer was free.

The little wren hopped over her head, uncertain, dizzy, unsure of how to spread its wings. Elizabeth plucked out another one, admiring its yellowy beak, the way it projected forward and slightly downwards like that of Chicken. This wren kept his memory of the sky alive, and instantly flapped its wings and gained the cloudless blue. One by one, in tears and hurry, the wrens were leaving the caged life behind. Elizabeth's pressed teeth slowly parted away to open up a smile, and then giggles.

The wren nested on her hair stood for longer, watching its peers gain height and conquer the air. Elizabeth started following the flock of birds who scattered away from the field towards the trees, following their flight, her arms open and stretched, beating her imaginary wings as she would soon join them. Her childish eyes of awe and love capturing their soar against the midday sun. In her courage to fly, the wren atop of her finally bid its goodbye, its beautiful notes of gratitude and freedom.

Freedom. Perhaps the only thing in the world she would ever feel bound to: to free and to be free. She ran-flew back through the Tavern's field, and around the mill, and past the bridge, and took the time to find a pear that had rolled near the stream, and got tangled with a goat which was drinking water close to her, until she was late. Her mother hated sending her on errands because Elizabeth never cared what the time was until she was hungry.

The Blood and The Heart

August, 9:16 Dragon

Alec and Tess were sitting on the porch, bent over the checkers board. The intense silence signaled something important and invaluable had probably been bet on that game. Malcolm rested his hands crossed on his chest and contemplated the two of them for a moment. "So..." he thundered, immediately collecting the kids' gaze to himself "I heard you two have been behaving really well this week..." A pause and he locked his gaze with one, and then the other, amused by the expectancy in their eyes. His face softened and the laughter lines became more prominent as his beard spread showing his grin. "Don't you two deserve to go horseback riding with me?"

Alexander stood fast, grabbing his father's hips in a tight bear hug for a yes. With his face half buried on his father's soft doublet his loudness escaped through the fabric "Yes, yes, hell yes!!!" Elizabeth followed, pushing herself up on her tiptoes and reaching up to be picked despite her non-lap size; Malcolm, however, complied, his left arm still managing to hold up the girl while his right hand messed up his boy's hair.

Hugs and tosses and excited shouts and finally the checkers board was left alone in the silence of the porch. At the stables, Malcolm allowed the chaotic energy to flow for he knew telling excited children not to rush and scream was like telling a fire not to burn. And those two were not any house fire, they were pure wildfire, the very image of the forces of nature. Something about their chaos rejuvenated Malcolm. His two healing springs.

Alec was overly loud, speaking too fast for when one idea was coming out of his mind, other ten were already queuing; his body was a bit clumsy as if every single one of his muscles needed to move, but not always they'd agree on the direction. He'd chatter and giggle as if everything would tickle him as the funniest thing ever. Tess was quieter, but not less alive; her eyes were alight and wide as if she'd swallow the world into her soul, and her mouth would part only to jokes and witty-silly remarks, that would sparkle Alec every time.

Malcolm derived an strangely relaxing delight from the shattered peace. He crouched down, arms wide open, inviting his blood and his heart to come to his chest. As the two gathered around him, he held both tight, sniffing their heads, the sour notes of summer sweat and maybe fruit jam invaded his nose and filled his eyes. There were moments he felt just glad to be alive. His back caressed by the octopus of hands, brushing off all sorrows and worries off of him. He rubbed his face onto theirs like a needy frail animal, feeding on this endless liquid sunshine they carried within. Their smiles were so wide it spread onto his face and he couldn't help but beam.

As he let go of them to open the stable door and finally move the horse out, the mess restarted. Alec jangled like a puppet held by a drunkard, bouncing and pouncing as he ran around his father. Tess was caressing the horse, and the thing Malcolm could account for beneath her moving hair was that smile capable of lighting up the darkest of days. They were two sparks of pureness, of energy and hope. They made him feel so strong he grabbed the both of them at the same time, one on each arm, and tossed them atop the horse, his chest filled with love and laughter. It was time to give them back a bit of the much they always gave him.

The Champion and The Followers

Kingsway, 9:16 Dragon

There was something about Alexander that drew people to him. It did help that he was a sharp looking child, with food in his belly, clean unmended clothes, and matching teeth. But it was more than that. He was sly, smart, bold. Bold without a trace of reservedness, with a conscious choice to be unafraid and get involved. Staunch and always sure. He had curious yet welcoming eyes, and he laughed like only a child can, a contagious echo of that precious freedom all adults have lost. His posture was firm, maybe too firm for a seven-year-old, but inspiring nevertheless. He was both a great show and good audience, he could entertain but also listen, he could influence and also encourage, all laced by his witty remarks. It was easy to understand why the other children would flock around him.

His most loyal disciples were a gaggle of boys, aged 8-and-past-a-half, 7-almost-eight, 6-just-completed and 5-but-smart-like-a-seven from a neighboring farm, the Erlians. The older, Jerold, was the most fragile of them all, his legs were too skinny he reminded Alec of a glass lady sculpture his mother had sitting on her vanity; even his face was feeble and narrow, not to mention his black hair made his skin look ever paler; except for his olive green eyes everything in him lacked colour. The second eldest, Cheston, was as common as a lard rat: he had blueish eyes, a mop of brown dull hair on his head and the same fair skin as the rest of

his family. Willard, the middleish one, was stout, with a nose which was constantly constipated, his hair a rusty ginger and his eyes of a lame light brown; he was shy and had the posture of someone who's trying to occupy less space, his clothes always seeming a tad bit too small for him. The younger of them, Daveth, the family's real dark sheep, with charcoal hair and hazel eyes, was a smart mouth and sly as a fox. The unevenness of the bunch laid only outside, the four boys were as if each a forming piece of the same child. Alec and Tess would always refer to them as the Erlians, as if one single entity.

As Alec hit the dirt road leaving for the village, his brood gathered around him. Alexander from the heights of his kingtude still felt only half without Elizabeth. That afternoon, while she gagged at changing diapers, he'd have to do only with his herd of boys. But marching up hungers a warrior, and as his house disappeared from sight, his hand dug deep into his pocket for a lint covered pecan cookie he had snuck from the cupboard in the morning. He broke it in half cautious of the hunger pang on the way back.

The blessings of a king, deep into the dirt and crumbles, together with a small strap of leather -which must have had at some point a quite boldly planned purpose- he found not one, but two bits! The one who can rub two coppers together is bound to do extravagant things. The celebration spread across his bevy. Deals and ideas were shouted with enthusiasm and finally the sugar cake consensus had been reached, under the condition that a piece was to be saved for Tess. Something to wash the toddler taste away from her throat.

As they reached the grocer, the Earlians decided to wait outside, faithful knights. Mostly because lady Elthelburg would shoo any legion of boys swooping on her shop, and no child on their right mind would risk losing one of her mouth-watering sugar cakes by overcrowding a place that had too many things to be broken.

Alexander stepped in, wearing his most charming smile, only to receive a profound snore as answer to his 'good afternoon' bidding. As he raised his eyes he saw the old woman behind the counter, drooling happily over the dry skin of her soft folded arms, her cheeks sagging down in a peaceful expression, her breathing loud and calm. Alexander turned his eyes around, wondering how to create an unpretentious noise so only her, not her bad humour, would wake up. From behind a sack of potatoes, he saw glistening eyes gazing at him, a small critter lurking in the shadows of the grain barrels and pumpkin stacks.

Stealthy he approached, pretending not to have noted whatever that was, a hand in his pocket and he pretended to drop one of his coins, and as he bent down to collect it, he placed the cookie half on the floor, near the eyes, allowing for the pecan and molasses smell to fish out the... tot?! His open palm searched the floor, as if he couldn't find his coin, and when the tiny hand reached out to fish the cookie, he latched the stick-thin little arm. The brat looked no more than three, maybe a skinny four. He had buck teeth and the curls of an angel, looked like neither a boy nor a girl and the rags couldn't verdict any. The long ears spiked out of his (or her) bony face and the wide eyes shone with tears. From both mouths, not a sound came off.

Alexander untightened his grasp, his eyes examining the child to make sure he hadn't caused any hurt. Something got stuck in his throat when he saw the map of stories in hues of blueish-purple bruises over the wee's skin. He offered a hand, and the little one retracted as if to self-

protect, a hand raised in front of his face, shielding from an expected blow. Alec collected his coin, added it to its twin and left the two bits on the counter, near the sleepy sloppy old smile. He proceeded to grab two large loaves of bread, one he wrapped in a take-home rag, the other he broke in half. Sitting on the floor he scooped the elven kid out, and passed a piece of bread to the child. Piece by piece he fed the infant, until half of a load stuffed the sunken belly outwards.

He then gave the little one the wrapped whole bread and pointed the way out with his eyes. Still sitting on the grocer's floor, he put a piece of bread in his mouth, trying to push down the ache in his throat. He swallowed the heavy load of flour, feeling lucky he would always have something to wash down the pains of life. His father often told him of poverty and starvation, but it was the first time he saw it look at him in the eye. All he could wish in this life is that he would always have a coin in his pocket to share. Slowly and soundless, still in pain he finally stood, lighter pockets and heavier heart. His knights were waiting.

The Duty and The Guilt

Harvestmere, 9:16 Dragon

The unopened letter sits beneath the woman's pillow. Undulated marks spot the parchment on the outside.

Love,

I will only be to Redcliff and back. I shouldn't take longer than a week this time, I promise you. I am sorry to leave so close to your birthday, but I am requested to ward a silo against plagues for the winter. It is good coin for a simple and riskless task, I simply could not refuse.

Besides, I will bring back some nice fabrics from the town to you, and then you, Revka and the girls can get new dresses for Satinalia.

Please, do not follow your cousin into this Chantry madness, I don't want you getting your ears filled with hate, as I feel happens every time I step away. I do not leave you for a choice, but rather because it is my duty to provide for you and ours. Believe me, love, I do so with the heaviest of hearts.

I love you,
MH

The Boy and The Girl

Harvestmere, 9:16 Dragon

In the two rocking chairs side by side the two women sat as still as the biscuits in the plate atop of the small table between them. Their fingers and tongue however moved with impressive speed as they chatted away the quiet afternoon. From one pair of hands a lavender coloured yarn twisted routinely creating a border for the flower patterned triangle that would become a jewelled shawl one day. The other pair of hands curved the long wooden needles up and forwards rushing its ways into a design of bumps and intentional holes forming some sort of delicate snowflake like motif in the small back of a child's vest. The mouths bounced back and forth in between guessing the fate of some Kirkwallian people and deciding which pearly button of silky ribbon would go best with their craft.

At their feet the twins played in silence, each of them living in separate worlds. Carver grumpily dragged a small wooden cart across the rug with one hand, the fingers of the opposite hand walking beside the cart through the perilous ivory road. Bethany cradled a fabric doll, her eyes closing as she snuggled the soft body, tiny hands delicately touching the porcelain forever smiling face of the doll and she rocked slowly back and forth in a gentle sway.

All seemed as peaceful as oil on canvas until a subtle rumble in Leandra's stomach made her hand let go of one of the needles to fetch a biscuit. Revka stopped for a second as well, resting her own needles on her lap, stretching and recoiling her fingers to relax the hand pain. The little boy rose his eyes to the two women rapidly jumping to his feet, ready to reach for a biscuit but receiving a small slap on the back of his pale hand. "Carver be polite! First you ask, and remember to say please" his mother cut him short as he frowned, unable to hide his frustration.

A deep breath and he caressed his own hand soothing the mild hurt, looking down contrary "Can I one biscuit, please?" he finally broke, voice a bit low, gathering courage to look up to his mother and aunt.

"Bethany, my dear, would you like a biscuit too?" Leandra offered, finally capturing the eyes of the little girl, who beamed a kind and calm smile at the two women, her chubby cheeks raised as her eyes became narrow and she lowered the doll onto her lap, letting an excited but sweet voice celebrate "yes mom, please!"

Satisfied and proud Leandra mirrored the girl's smile, as Revka joined the grinning duo and finally reached for a biscuit, handing it to her eye sparkling niece "Here my little princess", she added touching the girl's dark locks as the little one grabbed the biscuit with meticulous care.

"No! That biscuit is mine!" Carver launched in anger, snatching the biscuit from his sister's hand as he knew he'd asked first, he had even used the 'special word'. Why was it that everything he wanted was always given to Bethany first? As his mother gasped in shock and anger he knew his precious sweet treat would be taken away so he bit the biggest piece he could before it got taken away from him.

As Bethany looked in shock her empty hand with a small pout forming on her lips but without any burst of tears, Revka quickly fetched another biscuit for the little girl "Don't you worry my angel, here's another biscuit for you, you're brother is a glutton animal, that's what he is"

Leandra didn't have it in her to be so contained for the damage had been done against her child and by no one less than the one child she was supposed to educate. With a strong grip she firmly latched onto the little boy's arm, squeezing him with the intent of causing fear and pain, her voice angry and dry as she shook him "Carver you cumberworld! How dare you take something that was given to your sister?! You're not going to have any biscuit, do you hear me?" I will give your toys to Beth and you will watch her eat and play so you can learn how to be behaved like she is!" She added before letting go of him, taking a deep impatient breath before sitting down again.

Carver's eyes flooded immediately, more tears of anger than of pain as he watched his aunt place his toys away from him. Envy, anger, betrayal, pain, fear, even a bit of hunger, every emotion he was too young to cope with and couldn't express came out in that tantrum. He needed it as much as a whistling kettle needs to let out steam. He stood, tossing and fussing and kicking, his sharp cry loud and pungent, and regardless of the slaps and threats it was only when he was locked alone in the bedroom that he started to calm down. He was lost in an emotional sea and all he needed was that which he didn't have, a steady lighthouse to guide him, to welcome him to safety and out of the stormy waters. But for Carver, most of the time, that refuge was only provided by solitude.

The Girl and The Mirror

Harvestmere, 9:16 Dragon

For very few things she displayed such discipline and focus as she did for making sandwiches. She *wished* the butter into softness so she could carefully spread it like a smooth thick blanket over the slice of bread. The cheese, also *wished* into melting, then a bit of grated radish on a bed of fresh watercress, and of course, pickles. Butt on the chair, a mouth watery and ready and her eyes caught a glimpse of someone staring by the window.

Not mom. Not aunt. Whenever they were gone for the seamstress it was never as quick as they'd tell her to watch the twins for. It couldn't be Alec, he was off for all the indescribably fun because he lucked out to be a boy - and there she was, being a girl and watching the twins. What if that happened to be the last playable-outside day? Anger hit her so hard she mistook it for hunger and finally quieted down to eat.

Butt off the chair, her eyes searching the porch and at the side window she saw the pair of eyes piercing through, reaching only the first lower portion of the window. A head tilt. She knew those yes: the sunflower girl. A hand wave, a nod as answer, her nose pointing towards the door. The crispy air flooding her mouth as she retributed the girl's inquisitive smile. "How did you find my house?" curiosity slipping through the corners of her mouth as she moved away, inviting the other girl inside.

"I didn't" the sunflower eyed girl answered like an aloof skittish animal entering uncharted territory, eyes wide and sparkly by so many unknowns. "I came visiting Lothing again, and then I saw this house once. But I didn't find you around. I've seen this house, but you weren't

here,” the explanation came a little later, delayed by the bewilderment which all furniture and decoration overrode onto her eyes.

“Want a sandwich too?” Elizabeth asked, uninterested by the so familiar surroundings, biting firmly through her loaded slice. “Why are you staring so much? Is your house too different?” a mouth full of buttery questions inquired, interest and cheese almost escaping through the corners.

“Very” came off the pale girl’s still amazed lips. “Do you remember my name?” a question tossed on the table, as she finally looked at the hosting girl devouring the sandwich. She wished, hoped. It meant a lot. It would mean a lot.

“Hmmm” another chunky bite and her eyes rolled up as if searching for an answer hovering in the air. “Not really...” she said without any shame, taking another healthy mouthful, using a finger to tame a stubborn piece of pickle in.

“It’s Morrigan” a small sip of silence, swallowed with a bite of her pride. “I remember your name...” she added in a hurt note, looking at the table unusually covered with cloth, spreading her finger to touch it, uncertain.

Elizabeth swallowed a bitter bite of sadness together with that last piece of bread. Her eyes lowered to the girl in her strange, almost tattered clothes. The girl’s pain hurt inside her own chest. “But I remember your nickname. It was sunflower eyes,” she pointed out, ungluing the girl’s eyes from the cloth. Yes, those were two sunflowers, glistening now towards her sun. “But you remember my full name? Elizabeth Amell is a lot, you’ve even gotta breathe in the middle of saying it” she said genuinely surprised at the girl’s pristine memory.

Gleaming flowers. It meant a lot. “I’ve seen your mother, one day. She was adding face paint to her cheeks, looking in a beautiful mirror” she pointed out as she observed Elizabeth starting to put away the sandwich mess, tidying up as if that was something she did more often than playing.

“Face paint? You mean cheek powder? Or the lip tint?” she questioned trying to make sense of the other girl’s lack of words. “And that was not my mom, it had to be my aunt cause she uses these stuff... My mom doesn’t like it anymore” she added, stretching herself to put the pickle jar atop of the larder shelf.

“She’s beautiful... And her dress was too. And the necklace. And the mirror. Even her nails had colour,” the intruder girl’s voice daydreamed the description, and her eyes fell back on the tablecloth. Embroidered and colourful, silky to the touch and so new; not a tear, not a mend in that home.

All very uninteresting, a real mind shruger. “Hmpf!” Pickled jar mission complete, so she could now focus on what the girl was rambling. “Do you wanna see it?” She indulged the other, explaining herself right away “Her things, wanna see her things? She’s not at home, no one is. I’m alone. I mean, more or less, my cousins are napping, but they’re small, so they don’t count” she detailed.

“I... Yes!” Coy and then excited, one emotion clumsy stumbling on the other as she stood to follow the other girl, mesmerized by the never ending house. So many faces hanging on the corridor walls, all bearing the colours of a queen. As the bedroom door was open, her lips parted in awe. The smell inside the woman’s room was like a meadow in springtime. A hint of flowers and fresh linen, no mold whatsoever. She inhaled the room as if she could sniff it inside her, without a word.

A drawer opened, impatient fingers browsing through a sea of small trinkets Elizabeth never cared to know the use. “Here!” a victorious high pitched note escaped her lips as she raised the coloured balm stick on her hands. “Wanna see how it will look?” she suggested trying to please the other girl, reaching out for one of the three mirrors inside the drawer.

Open sunflowers blooming as the girl nodded in astonishment, unsure of what to do with her limbs, trying to anchor her feet on the carpeted floor while her mind wrapped it all. One nod, and it meant a lot. A heart skipping a beat each time the waxy stick struck her lip, tinting a smile on her trembling lips, a happiness so big it tried to come off her eyes.

“You look so pretty, Sunflower!” Elizabeth added as she finished, still less excited than she was when finished up her sandwich, but with a warm sensation in her chest. No more pain coming from the girl, but bloom. “Look!” she ordered, passing the mirror to the other girl.

The cold touch of the gold froze her entirely. Her image was a blur behind a curtain of water, and still she could tell her lips because of the crimson tone. Around her face, the flowery detail molded in the rich yellow metal, like a crown, like a signal, like a beacon, like magic. She was a queen in a portrait, she belonged in that hall, in that life. Blissful delight, joy, so much it kept coming from her childish eyes, a sunflower field of rain.

Elizabeth lowered her eyes inside the drawer, where the two other mirrors sat in abandonment. In her mind a flash of her aunt tossing one of them in, impatient for a reason she could not remember and possibly never cared to know. Unimportant, just another one... “Keep it”.

Sunflowers to the sun, the girl’s voice silenced her eyes from overflowing. A jolt of... Fear? Surprise? Shame? Gratitude? Friendship... striking right in her chest, where her hand laid unconsciously before reaching out to caress her new precious possession. It meant a lot. ‘Why’ was the question she left unasked.

‘Because it was the right thing to do’, would have been the answer, even if Elizabeth’s words could not search her heart for a reason, she felt it. When the girl left, the house was not a bit poorer, but richer than it had ever been in years. She wouldn’t forget her name next time. That meant a lot.

The Flame and The Shame

Harvestmere, 9:16 Dragon

“The right thing to do isn’t what you *think* is right! It is what we *teach* you is right! How could you give away something that’s not yours?!” the grasping hand shook her more than the words, as if the mirror would miraculously fall off her body, quenching hearts. “What in Andraste’s name were you thinking to let a stranger inside in the first place!” she thundered against the girl who did not have *dry* fears anymore.

“Revka, let me try to talk to her” the other woman suggested in an even less amused tone, approaching the still held girl, who had her brow in a sweaty furrow. “Listen to me, you went into my room, and took my belongings and said you gave them to some random girl who came by. Your mother and I are very disappointed in you. Very! We trusted you to take care of your cousins and these are the wrong things you are teaching them. *The Maker is very ashamed of you*, you know that, right? *You’re hurting your own family!*” she finished in a guilt-inducing tone, her eyes firm on the girl’s eyes, her face growing red because the child would simply not look down, rather Elizabeth had lips pressed in anger refusing to recognize her mistake.

“I am done, Elizabeth!” the mother rampaged reaching out for the rod. The child’s breath quickened and her eyes darkened, her lips constricted as she tried to hold in the anger. Swallow it or spit it, there was no other way. The rod cut the air screaming like a prelude for the pain, and her eyes sparkled wet, the bold red hickey grew throbbing on her leg. No words, no scream, only anger filling her mouth.

Leandra felt a pulse of resentment as the girl would not back down. Since she was not the mother, she used the only hurt she could inflict. “Your uncle will be so sad, so disappointed... You know, it was him who gave that mirror to me. *Why did you do it?*” the second voice added to the shrilling of the rod and now she was hurt, the wound went under her skin and cut through her anger, leaking it inside of her, the burning flavour of bile down her throat. Flammable. The scorn of the Maker she seemed to have earned long ago, raising her skirts to run better with the boys, but now, her uncle’s despise... That one was too much to bear.

Slowly the child’s lips parted, the breath of anger filling the air, fueling it. The flame flickered in the fireplace, pulsing alive with each syllable: “Because...” A candle lit up, a flame so red it illuminated the whole mantle: “it...” The fireplace gushed a long flame out, like an angry snake mocking its prey: “was...” Another candle came to life by fire: “the...” The heat started to overrun the room as all of the chandelier candles were lit at once above their heads: “right...” In the kitchen the stove burned to life, a strong, wood crackling fire: “thing...” The lanterns on the front door glared as their oil was set aflame: “to...” The girl’s eyes seemed to ignite from charcoal to the sun itself as she spoke the words: “do!”

A jaw too stiff to allow the lips to touch and Leandra was left trembling. Slowly she backed off from the child, horror and fear emanating from her too wide eyes. Revka had a hand on the centre of her chest, where despair had carved a hole, her soul so injured her body felt weak and her knees hit the ground. Elizabeth’s eyes turned from fire to water when the anger left her body. The flames all went off at once, and she felt so immensely cold. Fear finally made its way into her hollow being, once filled with rage. Her mother sobbed hiding her face in her hands while her aunt tried to protect her cousin with her own body, as if the girl was some sort of dangerous beast.

She was at the center of the room, in her house, with her family, but out of a sudden she was a stranger. The tablecloth and the decorated hall were unfamiliar. The taste of the pickles inside the jar atop of the shelf, unknown. She could distinguish her mother's muffled voice sobbing the question: "Why?". *That* was never the right thing to do. To feel. To be. Like the flames, she faded.

As the girl's mind reached the ever wet green prairies, her tiny body collapsed on the floor. Leandra was the first to break free from the shackles of desperation and approach the *faded* girl. Revka was still trying to keep breathing, terror and sorrows holding her still. Her voice tried to reach for her daughter, but her body failed her. "Does she live? Leandra, is she breathing? Is she alive?" a pile of questions, all seeking the one answer, her voice interrupted by convulsing sobs.

Leandra averted her eyes, but touched the girl's face, a hand scarf around her feverish neck. Her eyes closing slowly, she blinked long enough to realign her thoughts. Dread, horror, consternation, dismay. "She lives, Revka... We best contain *it* within her, and tomorrow we can... We can... I will talk to Malcolm as soon as he's back..." Doubt, concern, distress, worry. "Help me get her to the tub..."

Revka heard the words through her own crying, in discomposure following the orders, crawling on the floor, disabled by fear, approaching the girl, unable to recognize her daughter. As she felt the burning flesh on her hands, a tiny bit of her own blood, her heart stopped for a minute. Qualm and revulsion dancing inside her chest. "In... In my room, Leandra... We can't risk having her near the twins... I... I will endure this...". She stood on the feet of resignation, holding the girl's shoulders, helped by the cousin. She knew, at that moment, what was the right thing to do.

The Pain and The Lie

Harvestmere, 9:16 Dragon

So much water, but this time it could not hurt her. She needed air no more. Her body floated free, weightless across the green waters, carried by a gentle tide. The water flow embraced her body to a slumber, in which the dreams of water travels entered one another in shades of peaceful green. A meadow of water surrounding her, there were feelings of redemption and reconciliation, but her throat ached in thirst despite the water.

Homecoming. The ever floating castle has its drawbridge lowered, all wisps frolicked around her like puppies and kittens and chicks. She embraced the *fading* of herself, an overpowering sense of belonging. All the laughter in a language only she could understand. She did not miss the immutable world. But the thirst again, unsevered thread pulling her back. Homecoming. Her mother's voice, still muffled under the water.

"She is cursed, Leandra! My daughter... She... She is a... A demon! I will not, we cannot!" her mother's voice flooded through the tiny gaps in between the wood planks on the wall. Unstoppable like water, her mother kept shouting: "I am not letting Malcolm near her! This is

probably his fault, because he keeps touching her!” Doubt turned into certainty as her voice grew in tone.

“How dare you?” Leandra interrupted, so loud the crying of the babies in the room next to her was but a gentle murmur. “He would never do anything like that, even if he could! And we know these things just pass by blood! You know you could have brought it on us, because you laid with an elf, and they carry it stronger in their blood!” she accused in a hissing tone, as the babies kept on crying, like two lutes accompanying a bard.

“It was a mistake I corrected! He is out of my life, Leandra! But you kept an apostate inside our home! Near our children!” the woman thundered, the voice so strong the girl felt afraid they would come through the walls, like a broken dam, and flood everything. She shivered, pulling the blanket over her face not to hear it, but the voices, like water, kept reaching her.

“You wanted him to stay, you just didn’t have a choice! And “our home”, Revka? I was living here with Malcolm first!” the other voice said so harshly it seemed to cut barbing through the spaces among the wood planks. The girl pressed her teeth one against each other, trying to go deaf by the pressure inside her ears.

“Living in the house you bought with the Amell money? All these walls, Leandra, are made with grandmother’s jewels you brought with you! You ran away with a man who couldn’t rub two coppers together!” The voiced denounced, in quick speech, the growl of a hurt animal, in fast circles around the trap, startling the ignored wees more and more.

“So this is our home, Revka, if you really have to throw it at my face. And if it is ours, and if this is our family, you cannot just keep this from Malcolm!” the voice was lower, weighted with guilt and responsibility, embracing the charge. A small moment of silence, just one of the twins still bawled. The girl risked her head out of the blanket, a tiny worm trusting the *two Amell birds* were gone.

“I... I can’t Leandra...” the voice was much lower, like a faint strand of water, escaping through the gaps, still enough to make every word clear. “We still have Alexander, and the twins, Maker forbids, if she passes the curse along... We just cannot risk it... I cannot live with it. Whatever it means, I will see this through, I will not let the demon make home in this house... Our house.” The voice was each word smaller, prosecuting the sentence, embracing the guilt.

“Would you like to go back to the waters? You can sleep in there, it is very quiet...” A third voice, soft and caring, spoke; not away, reaching through walls, but inside her head, within her, her own wish turned alive. “You can trust me, I just want to have a good look at you. When you sleep, I’ll see your face,” the voice reasonably offered, drawing a relief smile upon the girl’s tired lips, softening her body back to slumber as the two women proceeded their trial.

In the next room, one baby still ached, for the soothing voice of Sloth could not reach for him. He would have to endure the pain of living in a world without the beautiful lies of a bending reality. Not all were lucky enough to be cursed, it seemed.

The Wall and The Tears

Harvestmere, 9:16 Dragon

Alec stared at the wooden floor without understanding why he had been rushed to his room almost violently. More than the tear swollen faces of his mother and aunt he tried to understand the absence of his cousin, but he was given no answers. In their room, only the twins, asleep and unaware in their cribs and the thick lingering doubts. He tossed himself against his bunk, digging his thumb nail into the softer pine wood, making the gouge deeper, carving the letter "E" on it. With a mouth full of anger he tried to swallow the will to start banging against the door. After a full minute which probably lasted for the longest hour in the universe, he flipped his body in one single jerk, sinking his face on the plushy pillow, feeling his bowels squirm.

Another hour-long-minute and he sat, his knees hinging back and forth as his head bobbed. He wanted to scream, the silence was choking him! He could hear faint whispers, maybe he smelled tea. Definitely sobs, muffled and controlled, almost hidden. Indistinguishable words, there was too much silence in the air for him to hear what they were saying. He rolled on his stomach again, clapping his forehead against the pillow. He couldn't form a thought pattern, it was if his mind had gone narrow and dry.

He stood again, numb paces to the chest of drawers and he collected a cookie he had left atop of it some time earlier. His mind lost interest in the first mouthful. It tasted of doubt and uncertainty. He was about to toss himself against the bed once again when the whispers finally became voice. And soon shouts. Apprehension became fear as they spoke of his cousin like something ominous had happened to her. The heat of anger also lit his face and balled his fists as his aunt ill-spoke of his dad. And an elf, an elf that had something to do with his aunt. He was still trying to make sense of the pieces he'd heard when his thought was severed by the primal scream of his waking brother.

The raw intensity and urgency of his cry soon summoned his sister to join him. They were perfectly safe and warm, comfortable in their fenced beds and in the company of cuddly toys. But for their minds, all they could know was that mom was nowhere close and the world suddenly became scary. Their unison screams were like a symphony from a place of utter terror, the very description of their minds lost in absolute despair. Alec approached the beds, trying to feel concern or empathy, but only anger filled his chest.

Somehow his eyes flooded, although his throat remained silent unlike his siblings. Alec sobbed like his body was rebelling against its existence, tired of a world which did not make sense. His mind craved for answers, any explanation, and his skin ached for a comforting hug. He wanted to scream his lungs out like them, vomit out his pain into the air, but he had already grown too much to cry like that. The tears kept coming as his mind spasmed in desperation. In a slow torpor he guided his body down to the bed once more, his red and wet face disappearing against the pillow.

Bethany, out of a sudden, seemed to have miraculously grown deaf by Carver's scream and finally was able to cry herself into the oblivion of sleep. Alexander stood up again, to check

on his sister; she looked inexplicably peaceful. Carefully not to wake her up he reached a hand onto her face. She was breathing lightly and softly. How could she have resigned to Carver's incessant screaming? He envied her ability to have this shut down response. Carver appeared to be so loud Alec felt like his ears were going to rupture. His brother always seemed prone to inflict torture on others somehow.

He moved away from the fenced beds and back onto his own bed, enveloping the pillow around his head. His thoughts walked down the roads of memory as he still tried to make sense out of that situation. If only he could have his silence back.

Chapter End Notes

If you read the Cassandra x Hawke in the pairings and was wondering where it would have started...

Some more child Morrigan because I wanted to add the mirror she mentions in Origins and because I find Morrigan's girly side rather amusing. And yes, a little (literally) Daveth cameo because why not?!

End Notes

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