



Metal World: Girl

Zoë A. Porter

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One

The Stalkers

Aloy sat still in the tall grass. Her breath was flat, and she tried not to make a sound. Only a few yards in front of her, the air was shimmering. She could barely make out the shape of the creature, that had the ability to cloak itself by some magic. Aloy knew that *magic* wasn't actually the right word; this was some technology the ancients used, but she had so little clue how it worked, that she might as well call it magic. Aloy was maybe the only Nora who didn't believe in magic; or in any form of divine intervention. Her own people -after shunning her for 20 years- now perceived her as their saviour. Sent by the All-Mother herself, to free the Nora people! Had she had any interest in political power or wealth, she would be their queen now.

Instead, she had set herself the task to restore *Zero Dawn*, so the machines could go back to keeping the complex artificial ecosystem alive, that was built around them.

Since the same person who had ended the old world, had denied them the knowledge of his world, Aloy had to seek it inside the ancient ruins by herself. Ruins that were guarded by machines.

Very slowly, she raised her bow. Even with only the outline of the creature barely visible, she knew exactly where to shoot. She put an arrow to the string, and carefully aimed. Then suddenly, she heard a hissing noise. Instinctively, she rolled to the side and barely evaded the small projectile.

She rolled to the side, and had a look at her shoulder. Her sleeve was torn and she saw a single drop of blood emerge from the skin on her arm.

“Damn it!” She hissed through gritted teeth. “Another one.”

The creature in front of her had heard her, and un-cloaked. She got up and started running. She didn’t run in a straight line, but hopped from side to side, while running because she didn’t want the creatures to take a proper aim. She used bushes and trees to disappear from view, and a few moments later the creatures had lost her track, and started running around in a search pattern, cloaking and de-cloaking. Stalkers are dangerous, but not very bright.

While the first stalker inspected the bush she had been hiding behind a moment ago, she ducked deeper into the red weed, and raised her bow once more. The stalker didn’t move, it seemed to look for her trail.

Suddenly the second stalker de-cloaked to her right, it’s small head just inches from her face. Obviously, it had been hunting her, while she concentrated on the other

one.

“Clever girl.” Aloy muttered, expecting the inevitable. But just when the stalker was about to strike, something hit it from the side. Sparks flew and the creature stumbled to the side. Without thinking, she jumped up and made it to the nearest tree. Pulling herself up the low hanging branches, she climbed out of reach from the attacking monster.

“Go, get the other one!” A voice called, and only then she looked down. The creature she had aimed her bow at only a minute earlier had taken pursuit, but now, when she was out of its immediate reach, headed for her rescuer, who was still fighting the second stalker. Aloy knew she needed to act. She reached for her bow only to find that it still was in the red weed below. She grabbed her spear from the strap on her back and dropped from the branch onto the back of the beast. It was a dangerous move, because if she missed the creature, she would be either trampled to death, or in reach of its weapons.

She made it. Her spear split the blue tubes, that connected the devices on the creatures back with its body. Two more slices with the sharp blade, and the arrow launcher and the part on the back, that made the creature invisible where gone. It reared up, and Aloy held onto it for dear life, while using the sharp tip of her spear to cut tube after tube. Blue hydraulic liquid spilled from the machine’s body. After a few seconds, the creature bucked once more and she fell off it’s back into the grass. She raised her spear to defend herself against the creature, but it’s legs had already given in. It collapsed next to her. She got up, looked at it for a moment, and then rammed

the spear right through the beasts body. The mechanical sounds faded, and all the lights on the machine went dark.

Aloy turned to the site where her rescuer had fought the other stalker. The second stalker was dead, but there was no one in sight. Aloy picked up her bow, and carefully stepped forward.

“They hunt in packs these days. Always check, if they are more.” The voice suddenly said from behind. It was the voice of a girl, by the sound of it, a young girl. Aloy grabbed her spear a little tighter, not knowing if this stranger might pose any danger. She turned around. Next to the tree, she had just climbed, stood a girl of maybe 17 or 18 years. She looked frail and slender, her skin of a light brown, and her hair as black as coal. When she saw Aloy’s face her eyes went wide in surprise, and her jaw dropped.

“Are you alright?” Aloy asked carefully, stepping towards the girl hesitantly.

It took a few seconds, until the girl had gathered herself enough to speak.

“Doctor Sobek?” She asked. Aloy froze.

Two

Tracking Aloy

Aloy stood in front of the stranger, frozen in shock. Her mind raced. How could this be? Who was this weird looking girl, who knew about Elisabet Sobeck? And why would she call Aloy by Sobeck's name and title?

A million questions raced through Aloy's mind as she stared at this weird girl, but all she could bring herself to say was:

"I'm not Elisabet Sobeck."

The girl blinked.

"I'm sorry. You look so much like her! Just... quite a bit younger."

Aloy raised her spear. "Who are you? What do you want from me? Are you *Eclipse*?"

The girl took a few steps back and raised her hands. "Wow, slowly. I'm not here to hurt you. If I were *Eclipse*, I wouldn't have gone to the trouble of helping you. I'd just watch that stalker tare you to shreds."

“Depends on what they want with me.”

“If the stories I heard in Meridian are true, they want you dead. You killed their god.”

The girl had a point. After the fall of *HADES* the *Eclipse* had been in disarray. The network between the *foci* had crumbled, and without a powerful leader, they were just a group of rogues. Dangerous when you encountered them, yes. But also always on the run, as the forces of Avad, the Carja sun-king, were tracking them down one after the other. So their most elaborate plan, when it came to Aloy was most likely “Kill her on sight!”

And Sylens? He was still out there somewhere, but he was not in league with the *Elcipse*. They wanted him dead even more than her. A traitor is worse than an arch-enemy, after all.

“Still doesn’t answer my question.” Aloy said.

“It answers one of them.” The girl said defensively, and lowered her gaze in a dramatical gesture.

Aloy could hardly suppress a smile. Point taken.

“My name is Paige.” The girl said.

Aloy relaxed a little, and lowered her spear. “Aloy.” She said.

“Yes, I know. It practically impossible to walk through the streets of Meridian these days without hearing people say your name.”

“That’s exactly why I am elsewhere. I don’t like it, when people make a big deal because of me. I’ll only return when this madness has stopped.”

The girl frowned. “Well, you’re going to have to wait a long while. After what you did, they’re going to give you your own page in the history books.”

"I hope not. I just want to be left alone."

"You saved the city. I doubt the good people of Meridian know that you also saved the world."

"I didn't. This isn't over. There's still much to do. And I don't need some girl from Meridian following me around. How did you find me?"

"I'm good at following a trail. And I am so not fangirling here."

Aloy looked at her bewildered. "You're not what?"

"I've spent the better part of the last twenty-odd years to find you. And no, I am not here, because you're an admired war hero -or the anointed one if you're Nora. I am here to help bring *Zero Dawn* back to it's full capacity."

Aloy looked at the stranger suspiciously. "What do you know about *Zero Dawn*?"

"That is was created to save the world from the destruction by the machines. And that it's broken."

"No one knows about this. Well, except me and Sylens. Did he send you?"

"I don't even know who that is!"

Aloy raised her eyebrows. Should she believe that? The girl was not wearing a focus, so she would not be in contact with Sylens, given he still had a focus that could link to another one. But the girl knew things, that only Aloy knew. And Sylens.

"If Sylens didn't send you, how would you know about *Zero Dawn*?"

"I grew up in the ruins. If you spend half your life in there, you learn a thing or two. If this Sylens guy is so interested in you, don't you think he would come in himself, instead of sending me?"

“Sylens is not the kind of man who likes to get his hands dirty. Believe me, I know him.”

“Seems you have a history.”

“You’re avoiding me. If you’re not from Meridian, why are you following me?”

The girl sighed. “I found this in one of the ruins in the west.”

She showed a small data pad to Aloy. Aloy had found a lot of them herself, the ancients had used them to store written texts, recordings of spoken voices or even moving pictures, so they could conserve their voices for eternity. Most of what she knew about the ancient world came from these magical devices.

She scanned it, using her focus. The focus activated the device and between them, the picture of a woman appeared. Aloy had seen her once before, and recognised her immediately as *GAIA*. Of course it was only a representation of something, that was normally unseen, for the actual *GAIA* had been a machine. But Aloy could not imagine her as anything other than a woman.

Now the image of *GAIA* began to speak.

“Searching. . . Restore unit from hibernation. . . Connecting.” After a few unintelligible noises, the voice continued.

“I am sorry for the emergency activation of this unit. I know it comes a surprise, and I don’t even know if you can understand this message, or its urgency. I have received a signal of unknown origin, that has caused my subsystems to detach from my core. This caused the *Hades* subsystem to act due to its programming and activate. This must be stopped by any means necessary. I have initiated a self destruct for the *GAIA-Prime* facility, but I am afraid

it's to late. I have initiated the gestation of a genetically identical clone of Doctor Sobek, in the hopes that she will find the means to restore the core functions and reboot the systems. But it I have to fear that the self destruct sequence will not destroy *HADES*. I need you to find the girl and protect her, until she is old enough to fulfill her destiny. I have a detailed report on the events of the last 11.4 seconds attached to this documents. You will find. . .”

There was a loud shrieking noise, and then the words “Data corrupted.” Then the message ended.

Aloy felt dizzy. It was the same story, *GAIA*'s image had told her inside the Sacred Mountain.

“Where did you find this?” She finally managed to ask the girl.

“I was salvaging one of the ruins. And all of a sudden, all the lights went on on this thing. I knew this was worth investigating. I mean, this stuff has been lying around, dormant and silent for over a thousand years, and suddenly it comes to life and replays a message like that? Would you have ignored it?”

Aloy needed some time to digest this. “No, likely not.”

Paige gave Aloy a moment, before she continued.

“I've been looking for you everywhere. And then, all of a sudden, there are stories about this Nora girl, who rides machines and clears the corruption. Who is smart enough to defend Meridian and does all sorts of super-hero stuff. I knew you had to be the girl from the message. The rest was just tracing your footsteps.”

Aloy wasn't sure what to make of it. This message made the girls story somehow believable, but she didn't

know, if she should trust her. But for now, there was little use in risking a fight by sending her away. Also, Aloy was way too curious about the girls story and the message she just saw. Of *GAIA* sent this out to someone in the west, she must have known, that there was someone there, who knew about the ancient world. Someone who could have helped. Maybe someone, who could tell her about the origins of that mysterious *signal* that had been the cause of all this.

Until she found answers to these questions, it was certainly wise to keep an eye on that girl.

“Alright.” She said. “Let’s assume I believe your story. What now?”

Paige smiled. “I will accompany you into the cauldron up there, and help you raid it for information. Then we’ll see.”

“Caudrons are no playground.” Aloy answered. “If it gets tough in there, I may not be able to bust you out.”

“I’ve been inside these things a lot. Most likely more often than you.”

Aloy sighed. “I cannot stop you from following anyway, can I? Very well.” She shouldered her weapons and turned towards her destination. Paige followed.

Then, suddenly, Aloy turned to the girl. “You said, you looked for me for twenty years. No offence, but you look like a Nora kid on her way to the proving. You cannot have been around for that long”

Paige laughed. “Thank you, I am flattered. I wish that were true. If you look closely, you will find, that I am by far not as young as I seem. I am easily twice your age.”

Aloy had a hard time believing that, but she decided to let the topic go, before she said something embarrassing. For a while the two women walked in silence.

Three

The Cauldron

With the guarding Stalkers gone, the way to the cauldron was free. Except for a watcher, that hid behind some rocks close to the triangular door. Aloy heard it, before she saw it, and turned to her companion to make sure she'd stay silent. The girl was not behind her any more. When she turned her attention back to the Watcher, which hadn't noticed her yet, she saw Paige between the trees. The girl was moving quickly, but in absolute silence. Before Aloy could raise her bow, the girl had jumped up a rock behind the watcher and dropped herself onto the beast's back. When the creature noticed her, it was already too late. Paige rammed a long dagger into the watcher's eye with an astonishing amount of force for someone so small. The watcher screeched, and collapsed. Aloy ran towards her companion

“What are you waiting for?” Paige said in a playful tone. “Don't you want to open the door?”

“That was impressive.” Aloy stated.

“Best way to deal with a watcher. Sneak onto them from behind, and smash the eye. Kills them every time. Plus you don’t get into the range of their weapons, if they carry them.”

“I prefer an arrow from a safe distance.”

“That’s because you’re a better archer than me.”

“If you’re seeking the thrill of *mêlée* combat, you’re stupid. It will kill you.”

The look she earned from Paige was unsettling for Aloy. It was the same intense stare she would have expected from the matriarchs.

“I had too much thrills in my life to be seeking them out. I know what I’m doing, or I wouldn’t do it at all.”

“Alright.” Aloy replied. “Sorry, I just thought it was a little dangerous.”

“It is, if you’re not trained to do it. Now are you going to open that door or not?”

Aloy sighed and went to the gate. She was used to being alone out here. Having this girl around already stressed her out. She was capable, Aloy had to give her that. But why in the world did she think GAIA’s message was directed to her? It seemed strange. On the other hand: The girl said she grew up in the ancient ruins. So most likely, she was an outcast herself.

“Maybe I should give her a chance.” Aloy thought, while working on finding the right settings to the door locks. When she found them, she pushed her spear in the lock.

“This is your last chance to quit.” She told Paige. “You really want to come along?”

The girl nodded.

Aloy twisted the spear, and the heavy door slowly began to open.

The inside of the cauldron was warm and moist. The cave was dim and eerie industrial sounds echoed from the walls. Many of the floor panels were shattered and broken, and mushrooms grew between the cracks.

Aloy picked up those of which she knew were usable for medical purposes and put them into her pocket. Then she headed into the gloomy world.

The cauldrons were quite the opposite of the outside world. While in the outside world, all traces of the ancient civilisation were ruined and overgrown by lush nature, in here plants and animals were few and far between. Everything in here was artificial. And even more so, as this world had not been designed by a human. The old underground bunkers, as strange as they were, all wore the unmistakable signature of humanity. Even though they had lots of things most people today had no idea what they were used for, a chair had been a chair back then, even if it was made from an unknown material.

The cauldrons were not designed by humans, so all of these points of reference were missing. There were neither chairs, nor steps or walkways. The structure of these automated workshops strictly followed the needs of their artificial masters. This world had no need for humans, and they were actively kept out.

When Aloy and Paige reached the end of the tunnel, they found themselves near a broad, steep ramp. Below,

they could see two watchers guarding the path that led deeper into the cauldron. On the opposite end of the great hall an upside down conveyor belt was transporting broken machine parts deeper into the facility.

Aloy pointed towards the conveyor belt. "That will carry us inside. We need to find the core."

Paige nodded. "You see those cables over there? Below the conveyor? They lead to a data hub. We should get access to a wiring diagram there."

"You've been inside one of these before." Aloy noticed.

"Let's say, I'm not a stranger to strange places." Paige grinned.

Aloy ignored the remark and put up her bow. She touched her focus and it made contact with the machines. There was a lot of information visualised, but she could easily make out the paths, the watchers would take. The first one was an easy shot. It made a sharp turn, and it's eye was facing into the right direction. She carefully drew her bow, waited for exactly the right moment and fired the arrow. The arrow smashed the watcher's lens and went straight into it's machine brain. It collapsed on the spot.

The sudden death however, alerted the second watcher, and it walked over to it's collapsed comrade. It looked around, but not up into Aloy's direction.

"Damn, I can't get a good shot."

Paige got up, and drew her dagger. "I'll bring it to you. Cover my back!"

With that, she slid down the ramp. She could get quite close to the second watcher before it noticed her. The already alerted machine had turned around before Paige

could attack. To Aloy it seemed, Paige had anticipated the move and turned around. Jumping in zig-zags, she ran back towards the ramp. The watcher didn't follow her. Instead Aloy heard the familiar humming the watchers weapons made when charging.

"Redeye!" She thought.

She took aim. Although she knew she had only a few seconds left, she took her time. Bringing the lens into the perfect target position, she exhaled slowly and drew her bow. Her mind was clear of everything when she reached her anchor and released the string. The arrow zipped towards the machine, and smashed it's lens just as it was about to fire. Aloy held her breath and remained in her position, her drawing hand resting above her shoulder.

"Good shot!" Paige's voice made time return to it's normal pace.

"Since when are there redeyes here?" Aloy asked.

"Maybe you pissed off the cauldron's AI by breaking into them, and stealing stuff." Paige returned.

"Let's hope there aren't any more nasty surprises in here." Aloy now slid down the ramp herself.

The lights were dim down here, and the two women carefully progressed through the shadows. By using her focus to predict its behaviour, Aloy could avoid contact with another watcher. They reached the conveyor belt undetected.

Paige started messing with the cables, which grew from the wall like vines. It took her a while, until she pulled up a small box from between the cables. It was wired into the mess of cables, and slightly glowing.

"What's that?" Aloy asked.

“Network repeater.” Paige answered as if that would explain anything. “Scan it with your focus.”

Aloy activated the small device by her ear and looked at the box.

JTAG-W maintenance interface.

Address: fd8b:f5a:7c6d:e519:67d4:42d0:bc64:1ca0

Connect? YES NO

Aloy had no idea what that meant, but usually the Focus would grant her access to information, not harm her. And she had found out that when things were to be dangerous, extra warnings would show up.

She selected *YES*.

In an instant, her field of vision filled with the shape of a giant tree. Although, unlike a tree, many of the branches were interconnected. At first she was a disappointed, because the focus didn't give her control over the cauldron. She had visited facilities where she could operate everything just through her focus. But cauldrons are not made for human control. It took her a while until she realised that what she saw was a schematic of the network of cables and wires that connected every piece of the cauldron. If they followed the wires to their point of origin, it would lead them right into the heart of the cauldron. Where the machine parts she needed would be.

“I could have used that earlier.” She said to Paige.

“It's a remnant of the ancient technology this is all based on. If need be, you could open these boxes up, and connect them with wires. The basis of this is a lot older than AIs, cauldrons and even the network technology it-

self.” Paige answered. “But without reading the manual, you cannot possibly know that.”

“What’s a *manual*?” Aloy asked, puzzled.

“That’s the same question the ancients would have asked.” Paige laughed. “Never mind.”

Although they had a full map now, that showed every single line that lead to the centre of the cauldron, getting there was far from easy. The cables would sometimes disappear into walls, and emerge on the other side, or run across deep ravines, with no bridges to pass. So the pair had to take several detours, and climb steep rock cliffs. Sometimes they had to remove metal panels, to open a way to the other side of a wall.

Finally, they reached the inner chamber, where the machines were finally assembled. Below it, was the central computer hub, the destination, because the *memory stones* were located, at least that was Aloy called them, the ancients surely had their own fancy name for them. But the ones inside Gaia were burned, and Aloy needed a lot of the green and black little bricks to replace the lost ones.

They had reached the edge of an overhang, that opened the view into the chamber. It was a circular chamber that was enclosed by a giant dome. The only way out was a platform lift, that lead back to the entrance gates of the cauldron. It was how new machines were released in the world above. Aloy knew this because she had found out a long time ago that, besides all the chaotic and organic structure of the cauldrons, their overall layout was the

same. And it made sense too. This way, the cauldron needed only one gate, that could be used to transport damaged machines or raw materials into the top level, while serving as an exit for the finished machines. Given that they were build to be sealed in completely to stop the Faro-Plague from finding them, it seemed the best decision. Doors are always a weak point, so having as little of them as possible was preferable.

Now, the problem was, that between the computer core, and the platform that could take them outside, was a fully assembled Stormbird, sitting on the platform ready to be activated.

It would be activated inside the cauldron, once the AI spotted the intruders. And then, Aloy thought, the four watchers, patrolling around the sleeping giant, were the least of their problems. Of course they could wait until the Stormbird was released, but then the platform would be occupied by whatever creature the cauldron thought the world would need next. And in Aloys experience it would be even worse than the Stormbird. A Thunderjaw maybe.

While Aloy was still pondering her options, Paige rummaged through her backpack. She produced a small metal contraption.

“Do you know how to use these?” She handed the device to Aloy.

It was the smallest rope caster Aloy had ever seen. Unlike her own rope casters, it’s shaft was made from metal instead of wood. And it was a lot smaller. Instead of a rope, it used a thin steel cable. Something that Aloy thought to be a little wasteful. The only people who were

able to make steel cables were the Oseram, and even their steel was not of the quality than anything the ancients could produce. But in this case, the tiny rope caster was just what she needed.

“Impressive,” Aloy said and took the rope caster.

“You tie the Stormbird’s legs, while I take out those watchers.”

“Are you sure, you can get them? They are red eyes.”

Paige just nodded. Aloy looked for a place to anchor her abseiling hook.

With the hook in place, Paige was the first to get down to the factory floor. It was tricky timing to get down in the small time window, the watchers wouldn’t be able to see them coming down, but she made it down.

Aloy looked at the four watchers through her focus, and knew that getting down now meant she had to rely on Paige to keep the watchers busy for long enough for her to get to the floor and disable the Stormbird’s legs with the rope caster. If she took too long, the Stormbird would attack, and certainly kill the girl.

She sighed, and went after Paige.

Aloy could not see what Paige was doing, while she was gliding down the rope, but whatever it was, it seemed to work in keeping the watchers from looking up. She reached the ground safely, and –without looking what Paige was doing– headed for the Stormbird, which seemed to just wake up. It lifted it’s giant head and started spreading it’s wings. Aloy used the wings as cover, and made her way behind the monster. Out of reach of the creatures powerful beak, she prepared the rope caster, and fired a steel cable at the creatures legs. It tangled around

the clawed feet, and before the creature could react, Aloy had bolted the other end of the cable into a crack in the ground, preventing the creature from getting airborne.

She fired a second rope around one of the giant wings, attempting to tie the machine to to the ground. She could here the roaring of the engines underneath the wing, as the creature tried to break free.

She aimed for the other wing, when she heard the hissing sound of a red-eyed-watcher's weapon charging to her right. Instinctively, she let go of the rope caster and rolled to the side.

The hot bolt of plasma missed her by inches only. In one swift motion, she got back to her feet, picked up her bow, and pulled an arrow from the quiver at her side. Almost as if in trance, she stepped to the side, drew her bow and fired the arrow into the single giant eye of the watcher, who had just begun to charge another bolt. Electric sparks flew, as the watcher collapsed.

“Watch out, 10 o'clock!” Paige shouted.

Aloy had no idea what that meant, but instinctively turned left just in time to see the Stormbird turn towards her. It still tied to the ground, but the missing third rope gave it enough room to turn it's head around. Aloy jumped to the side, but wasn't fast enough. She escaped the beak, but the side of the giant creature's head hit her hard enough to send her flying. Years of experience had taught her how to dampen her fall. It still hurt, but she was sure nothing was broken.

“Didn't you say, you'd take care of the watchers?” She shouted over the hissing of the Stormbird.

“Sorry, I thought I had that one's attention. They

were hardier than I thought.”

Aloy didn't lose any more time. Instead she pulled out tear-arrow, and fired at the creatures lighting gun. That got it's attention. She could feel the static as the gun, although slightly damaged now, charged.

“Grab the rope caster and tie down it's wing!” She shouted towards Paige, while she kept firing arrows at the creatures beak. In it's tied down state, the ability to throw lightning bolts was the creatures most dangerous ability. At least if you didn't get too close.

She could see Paige dive behind the machine to retrieve the rope caster.

“Watch out!” She cried, when the beasts tail swung around, crackling with electrical charge. Paige was flung across the room and let out a loud moan, as her body crashed into the wall. She fell to the ground motionless.

At this moment, Aloy was pretty sure she was dead, but she was too busy not dying herself, to think about it. She jumped to the side, evading the lightning bolt the beast spat at her. It missed, but the thunderclap was so deafening, that Aloy's ears rang. On her feet again, she aimed, and fired another arrow at the creatures beak, just to dive out of the range of it's lightning gun once more.

Suddenly, the beasts remaining free wing was pulled down, and Aloy could see Paige lying flat on her belly, frantically trying to fix the steel cable with it's hook in the cracked floor before the creature could free it's wing again.

The beast reacted by pulling up the wing, and attempting to turn towards Paige. Aloy reacted immediately. She dropped her bow, and instead pulled the spear,

that she carried tied to her back. In *mêlée* combat against a Stormbird it was useless, but she was not aiming for an attack.

While the creature turned its flank towards her, she slid towards it, and pushed the metal cylinder on top the spear into a small hole in the beast's side. Her focus showed a glowing ring around the hole, which slowly turned blue, too slowly for Aloy's taste.

The beast's wing beat down, and Aloy got hit in the head, but she managed to keep the spear in place, and finally, the ring was all filled with blue light, and the creature stopped attacking and calmed down.

Aloy allowed herself a moment to hold her head and moan, then she patted the Stormbird's side.

"See, it's not that bad." She told the beast.

Then she turned around to see how Paige was doing.

The girl was sitting on the ground, the rope caster still in hand. Aloy could see that she was covered in machine oil, but she wasn't bleeding.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

"Did you just hack a Stormbird?" Paige asked, instead of answering the question.

"No idea what that means, but I know how to override machines. The large ones are harder, and they tend to restart after a while, so we don't have much time." Aloy replied. "So, are you alright?"

"Yes, don't worry about me. If we only have a moment, make use of it, and grab what you need, before this beast turns *Mr. Hyde* on us again."

Aloy nodded, and stepped toward the Stormbird.

“I need you to move, and let me access the core.” She told it.

As if it understood her, the creature stepped aside, and rested its giant head on the floor beside the room’s wall.

Aloy used the sharp end of her spear to open a hatch and slipped inside the computer core, that was just below the mechanics of the platform lift. There were no defences here, no weapons, no watchers. Just a small room, big enough for a maintenance machine to access it for repairs. It was quite small for a human, but large enough that Aloy could crawl inside, and begin dismantling it.

She had learned enough about the structure of the AI system to know which parts she needed, even if she still had no clue how they actually worked.

The damage to the cauldron was minimal. Even though she robbed it of its master brain, effectively disabling it, she knew from experience, that this complex system had an astounding ability of repairing itself. Within days whatever machines repaired the cauldron would have replaced all the parts Aloy took. Repeated visits to cauldrons she had previously disabled had shown her, that it only stopped them from a while. Elisabet Sobek had created a truly resilient system, that was able to recover even from being robbed of its brain after thousands of years.

When she emerged again, Paige had gotten back up to her feet, and was operating a column which –Aloy knew– could be used to move the platform upwards. She looked a bit shaken, but she was determined. Aloy collected her gear, and stepped to the Paige’s side. But the girl was

already done with overriding the platform.

The platform began moving upward, and the Stormbird stirred a bit, but lay still. The readings in the focus were still glowing blue, so the beast was tame. Once more, Aloy marvelled at the elegance and beauty of the machine. Even though she knew much more about what the machines were, and how they worked, their aura of myth and magic never went away. They served a clear purpose, and even with all the knowledge she had gathered, Aloy could not entirely understand them. The Nora saw them as gods and guardians, and in some way, this was true. GAIA, the AI that had designed and created them, had long since evolved past even the superior intellect of her creator, and thus had become a goddess in the true sense of the word: A being of unfathomable intelligence, that had created life out of death. Only that the goddess herself had been the product of human imagination. But wasn't that the nature of a god?

When the platform reached the top level, she turned to the giant machine, putting her hand on its beak. The machine stared back through mechanical eyes.

“Wait here, until you're ready.” She whispered. “You have an important task to do.”

The creature laid its head back down and kept looking at her. But as the two women left the cauldron, it did not follow them.

Aloy took her attention to Paige.

“You're limping.” She observed. “Did you break anything?”

“I told you, I’m fine!” Paige replied in a mixture of defensiveness and aggression.

“Hey, I’m just concerned.” Aloy raised her arms in defence.

Then she pointed to a small path that led up the mountains surrounding the entrance to the cauldron.

“There’s a small cave up there.” She said. “A good place for a camp. It’s getting dark soon.”

Paige nodded and followed her, but didn’t say anything.

Not long after their climb began, Paige began to fall behind. She moved slower and slower, although she did her best to keep up. She dragged her right leg behind, although her face didn’t show the pain she must be in.

Aloy stopped and raised her hand. “Stop!”

“Did you hear something?”

“No, but we can’t keep climbing like that. The slope gets steeper higher up, and you can hardly walk any more.”

“I told you, I’m. . .”

“You’re not, you’re hurt, and we’re going to see to your wounds.” Aloy’s tone made it clear, that she was not willing to discuss the matter any further.

“We need to get higher up, at night this place will be crawling with machines.” Paige argued.

“I’ll carry you up that mountain, if I have to.” Aloy returned. “But it’s not of much use, if you’re dead when we reach the top.”

With that, she turned to Paige, and pulled her hands away from covering her leg. Then she stumbled back.

The leg was covered with machine oil, both dried and fresh. The leg of her trousers had been torn and the flesh underneath ripped open. Below that, Aloy could see the source of the machine oil. The blue liquid was dripping from a torn tube, that connected artificial muscles, which looked identical to those she knew from the Chargers and Broadheads she had repaired before.

For a moment she simply stared at the girl.

“You’re. . . , you’re a machine.” She muttered.

For a moment, Paige looked, as if she was going to cry.

“I’m sorry.” She said quietly.

Four

Rearranged

Aloy held her breath for a moment. Should she prepare to fight? It was a nonsense thought of course, Paige had not been hostile so far, and right now she looked terrified not angry. Also, she was hardly in a shape to pose a threat.

So she took a deep breath, and stepped towards Paige again.

“Let me help you.” She said.

Paige backed off. “I’m sorry.” She said. “You weren’t supposed to know that.”

“Are you afraid of me?” Aloy asked. She thought of the countless machines, she had hunted, and decided it would not be exactly surprising, if she scared the girl to death. But then: Could machines feel fear? Cyan had convinced her that machines were capable of being lonely, so that was a possibility. Right now, she needed to play it safe. Paige needed her help.

“I mean you no harm.” She said. “Just let me have a look.”

“No!” Paige pleaded. “Don’t touch me!”

She turned her head to the side, and it dawned on Aloy.

“Oh, All-Mother!” She thought. “She’s not scared, she’s embarrassed.”

Aloud, she said: “The place will be crawling with machines very soon, and from what I’ve seen so far they don’t care much if your a sister or not. They’ll attack you, just as they’d attack me.”

“Can you even repair my leg?” Paige asked.

“If your muscles work like those in the strider legs, then yes. I’ve done it before.”

Reluctantly, Paige allowed Aloy to come closer and inspect the damage. It was not as bad as it first looked, and when rummaging through her satchel, Aloy found some machine fibre she could use to stitch the muscles back together. She had done this with machines she had over-ridden, so she new that, by whatever magic the machines worked, once reattached the artificial muscles could repair themselves just like real muscles would.

“So far, I have only met one machine that could actually talk.” Aloy began. “And she is build into a volcano. You’re pretty unique.”

Paige stared at the boulders in front of her. “I’m not a machine.” She said defensively. “Not really.”

Aloy stopped working on the leg momentarily and looked at the girl quizzically. “What are you then?”

“It’s hard to explain.” Paige returned. “A lot of me, most even, is machine. But inside here,” she tipped her

temple with a finger, “is a human brain.”

Aloy resumed stitching the broken fibres in Paige’s leg.

“But I’ve seen machine brains. They are made from small chips and have not much in common with a human.”

“In this way I probably am unique. At least in this time.”

Aloy finished repairing the muscles and closed the artificial skin over the wound. If it worked anything like the materials any other machine was made of, it too would mend itself over time, if it was kept in place. Unlike the rubbery material that covered the more delicate parts of a machine, this machine skin looked exactly like human tissue from the outside, although it had a different texture when touched, and it felt cool to the touch. Aloy took some clean bandages from her satchel, and made a mental note to get new ones in the next settlement she’d come across.

“OK, done.” She finally said. “Now let’s get out of here as quickly as possible.”

“Agreed.” Paige said, got to her feet and enjoyed the full movement of her leg. She tested putting her weight on it and to her surprise, it held. The sensors in her leg still told her, that it was not fully intact, but the leg worked perfectly.

“Thank you, Aloy.” She said with a shy smile.

“Don’t mention it. I can hardly leave you with the stalkers, can I?” Aloy shouldered her satchel, picked up her weapons and began the climb.

Paige was right behind her. “Do you know this area?” She asked.

“Well enough, why?”

“I just don’t want another nasty surprise, like glinthawks on the top, that’s all.”

“I’ve never seen glinthawks up here, so I guess we’re safe. But there is a small cave, where we can spend the night.”

They climbed in silence for a while, with Aloy looking over to Paige every few feet, to check if she was all right.

“I’m good. You did an excellent job on my leg. I’m not going to fall!”

Aloy raised her brow. “If you say so.”

She pulled herself over the last ledge and reached out her hand to help Paige up.

Paige reluctantly took Aloy’s hand, but then pulled herself up the ledge. The ledge opened into wider area, which was covered in grass and some trees of the same variety as a few hundred feet below. Surrounded by rocks and the steep walls that led to the summit, the place was protected from the cold wind and reasonably safe. Although it was hard to see deep into it, as the sun was beginning to disappear behind the mountain ridges.

“The cave is over there.” Aloy pointed into the plateau, where Paige could just make out the maw of a cave covered by the mountains shadow. Her vision was sensitive to more frequencies of light than a regular human’s, so she could make out details by detecting the heat they radiated, but the cave was as cold as the surrounding rocks, so she could not peer inside. But it also meant, it was probably unoccupied, because Paige would have seen the glow of a machine heart or the body heat of an animal.

“Hey,” Aloy interrupted her train of thoughts. “how about you gather some firewood, and I get us dinner?”

“Ah, well...sure.” Paige was caught a bit off guard, but Aloy was right. It was a good idea to have a fire burning, before it was dark. So she nodded to Aloy and went into the trees to collect wood and dry grass. Aloy went deeper into the plateau, with her bow and arrow in hand. Paige resisted the urge to follow her. Aloy was quite capable of taking care of herself.

“She’ll call me, if she’ll needed help”, she thought. Somehow Aloy was not what she had expected. Sure, ever since she woke up in that underground facility, she had been looking for the girl. And she had half expected to find a child, helpless in surviving outside her tribe and completely ignorant of the history around her and her role in it. Of course that was nonsense: Twenty years had passed and Aloy was a grown woman. Of course she was capable of taking care of herself. And she had been smart enough to figure everything out on her own. No surprise there either: If she had anything at all in common with Dr. Sobek, Paige knew that she was simply no match for Aloy’s sharp mind. The huntress probably knew more about the ancient world than Paige herself. Most likely when it came to the details of what had happened, and why. Paige had not seen Faro or any of the generals for Operation *Enduring Victory*. She had only seen the Battlefields.

When the fire was on she stared into the flames and listened to any sign from Aloy. She didn’t have to wait long until Aloy appeared, carrying two squirrels.

“Not the biggest feast”, she said grinning, “but they’ll fill our stomachs.”

“You can have them both.” Paige said. “I don’t eat.

I only need a little bit of water every now and then and a handful of nutrients for keeping the brain alive.”

“Are you serious?” Aloy looked at her in surprise. “But you need something to keep you going!”

“Radionuclide battery. Lasts for hundreds of years.” Paige tipped her chest.

Aloy started flaying and gutting her game with the swiftness of a seasoned hunter.

“What exactly are you?” She asked without taking a break in her work.

“In my time, we called it a *cyborg*.” Paige explained. “That’s when you replace parts of a human body with machine parts. Or –in my case– remove the brain from the body, and put it into a machine.”

Now Aloy looked up from her work and sought Paige’s gaze. “No offence, but that sounds like a horrible thing to do to a person.”

“It is.” Paige confirmed. “And I didn’t volunteer for it, believe me.”

Aloy sat in silence for a moment, holding her knife to the squirrel without cutting.

“Who did this to you?” She asked. “Who put you into that machine body?”

Paige looked away.

“Dr. Sobek did.” She finally said.

Five

Breathe

Aloy stared at Paige in shock for a moment. After all she had learned about Elisabet Sobek, she couldn't believe that the woman was able of such unspeakably cruelty.

When Paige looked into Aloy's face again, she instantly regretted her words.

"It wasn't her who ripped my from my own body. She only tried to give back what was taken from me. At least a small part of it. I asked her to kill me, but that was something she could never bring herself to do." She explained.

"But let me start at the beginning: I was born in the outskirts of Chicago in the mid 2040s. Chicago was one of the largest cities in a part of the world known as the *United States of America*. It had long since developed into a corporate state, which is like a tribe which is run entirely by merchants. They make the rules, and the only thing that counts, is what you own. If you don't own

things, you have to work for someone, so they give you food and lodging. I grew up as one of the have-nots. My mother worked in three jobs, and still didn't always make ends meet. As a child I went hungry on many days.

I also wasn't the brightest kid on the block. You see, I am not like you or Dr. Sobek. I always struggled learning all the complicated things about how the world works. But I was strong and fast, so I was good at sports. And even early on, when we played games it was clear I was good at tactics. I could plan ahead and get my team an advantage.

When I was about 16, I had used that knowledge to form a small gang of mostly girls. We went into shops and created diversions. And then we nicked stuff. Sometimes we would steal money from people. Nothing big, and we never got caught. Or, if we did, we were able to put the blame on someone else.

Until, that was, that fateful day in November. I was on a train back home and a guy with a leather suitcase boarded the train. It was the kind of suitcase wealthy businessmen used, and we thought he might carry his well filled wallet in it, or maybe an expensive phone.

One of the smaller girls created a diversion, by pretending she was hurt and the guy turned his attention toward her long enough that I could grab his suitcase and walk off the train with it. Normally, we would open these cases, take out any money we'd find, or anything we thought to be valuable, and then place the suitcases in the *lost-and-found*. More often than not the owners would think they left their luggage on the platform and not even inform the police, even if they saw that some-

thing was missing.

But not this time. When I had left the station and ran into the back alleys to avoid the cameras, I couldn't believe my eyes: The suitcase was full of money. More money than I had ever seen. Must have been at least 500,000 dollars. More than enough for my mother to move to a better neighbourhood, buy a fancy house in the countryside and never work three jobs again. I never even thought about where all that money came from. Instead, I went home and hid the suitcase in my secret stash underneath the house and took out a few hundred dollars. I planned to pay out the other girls from that. I also went downtown again to buy a very fancy pair of running shoes that I always wanted. I know, it wasn't very nice of me not to share the riches with the other girls, but when you grow up in the slums, that's what you learn: Think of yourself first. Not that I was thinking very much, I was blinded by greed. I imagined, how my mother would be happy, if I could help out. But I also knew she would not condone stealing. So I could not barge in at home and show her the stacks of money. I learned soon that it was for the best, because the next day, I was in for a very hard landing.

Usually, we met in the ground floor of a boarded up house in West Englewood, which we considered *our hood*. We shared it, of course, with several street gangs. The gangs were organised like small tribes, and they didn't care for the greater law. They made their own rules. And they were dangerous. The group I was in was a group of girls,

not really a gang. We had come together for self protection mostly, but we weren't as organised as the real gangs, who called themselves *nations* in Chicago.

Since we weren't meddling with their affairs, the local gang, the *Black Mamba Nation*, usually left us alone, and protected us from the others. I think -although many of them weren't much older than us- they mostly saw us as kids playing around. But not on that day.

A few of the *Mamba's* had come to our hide out, and their local leader, DeShawn, was glaring at a group of girls, huddled together in a corner. He was clearly upset and shouted at them. I hurried over to help my girls.

"What's going on here?" I tried to sound more confident than I was. He turned to me. I always had gotten along with DeShawn, who was 6 years older than me, and had always tried to protect me and my girls. I'd never seen him like this before.

He took a deep breath, and tried to calm down. "There's been a fuck-up yesterday." He said.

The way he said the word *fuck-up* alarmed me. It sounded a lot like big, big fuck-up.

"Yesterday, a group of girls made some ruckus at the train station downtown, and a suitcase was nicked."

A shiver went down my spine. "So?" I asked, trying to stay cool.

"There was money in it." DeShawn said. "A lot of money."

"You want us to look out for your suitcase?" I asked, although I knew perfectly, what suitcase it was.

"One of you took it." He said. "We know that, because you were seen."

Fuck. This wasn't good. I swallowed. I tried to figure out what to do. I needed to buy time.

"Let me handle this." I said, my voice shaking a lot more than I wanted it to. "I can get your money back. I'll find it for you."

DeShawn stepped closer to me. "I know you will, or something terrible will happen."

"Leave the girls out of it, please." I pleaded. "I'll get you your money."

"You know where it is then?"

I nodded. "Give me an hour. I'll be back soon. You'll have your money back, I promise."

DeShawn looked at me. "I like you Paige, and I believe you. But this isn't my money. You stole it from a mule from the *Crimsons*."

My insides immediately turned to water. The *Crimson King's Nation* was one of the most infamous gangs in Chicago. They were known for their brutality and violence. If you saw dead kids hanging from a freeway bridge in Chicago, it almost sure that was their work.

DeShawn looked at me intensely. "If they don't get their money back by sunset, it's all-out war between us and the *Crimson's*. And they want a name."

"A name?" I asked.

"Of the thief. You don't mess with the *Crimsons* and live to tell the tale."

I couldn't help, but start crying. "But I'm sorry. I didn't know!"

"That won't be enough. I cannot protect you anymore, Paige. You fucked this up big time."

I pointed to the girls. "What about them?"

“I make sure that they are safe. And if you give me the money, I’ll make sure, you have a head start. That’s all I can do for you.”

I nodded, giving up completely. “Come with me, I’ll give you the money.”

I led DeShawn to my hiding spot, and handed him the suitcase. “I took out 200 bucks.”

“Where are they?” He asked.

I pointed at my feet. He saw the shoes and nodded. “Because I like you, I will deal with that. They’ll get back every penny.”

I hung my head. “Thank you.” I murmured.

“You have until sundown to get as far away from Chicago as you can. And never, ever come back! They’ll get you, and they never forget.”

I nodded again. I knew that. DeShawn turned around and left without looking back. It was all he could give, and he had already stretched wide. It would have been easy to just hold me down and hand me over to the *Crimsons* together with the money. If he, or any of his gang, saw me again, they would kill me and send my head to the *Crimsons* in a cardboard box. I was fucked.

All I could do now was run. But where? I went inside, and packed a few things into my backpack. Before leaving I hesitated. Then I went back inside, and wrote a short note to my mum, apologising for leaving her and being such a burden. I did not mention there was a price on my head though.



Half an hour later, I was downtown and had something like a plan. I stood in front of a recruitment office of the *United States Armed Forces*.

The man inside waved me in.

“How can I help you?” He asked. “Are you interested in a career in the forces, Miss?”

I nodded. “Actually, I came to enrol.”

He looked at me, and raised a brow. “Are you at least seventeen years old?” He asked.

“Yes, sir.” I said, in as a straight a voice as possible.

“You have any ID?” He asked.

I gave him my driver’s license, which was a fake, and not even a good one. But it said I was eighteen and I hoped that would suffice. He seemed sceptical and kept it, but sent me on to the medical examination.

The examination was quite embarrassing, as the doctor was a man, and I had to strip down to my underwear. But I went through with it, still hoping that this was my ticket out of the city.

After I got dressed again, I had to wait. I heard the doctor talk to the recruitment officer, but didn’t understand much, but I heard the words *ideal candidate*.

Then the officer called me back in, and handed me a batch of paper.

”Sign here,” he said, ”and here.”

I nervously signed the papers and became a soldier.

”When do I leave?” I asked.

”You’ll be here, tomorrow at 700 hours precisely.” The recruiter said. ”And don’t be late!”

As if I would be late! This was my ticket out of this city, away from the place where there was a price on my

head. I actually hid behind the office building, sleeping on the street.

So I was in a little disarray, when I stood in line with the other recruits. And of course, I was shouted at because of it.

They drove us to an army training centre in Iowa. The only thing I remember from that day, is that they cut off my long black curls. When I lay in my bunk that night, I couldn't sleep, because I was afraid what my future might bring.

The first three months were basic training and they were rough. And I mean that. But weirdly, I began to enjoy it. Yes, they let us run until we collapsed, always walk an extra mile. But there was also a sense of camaraderie growing. And for the first time in my life, I had the feeling that I belonged somewhere.

At the end of the basic training, I wrote a long letter to my mother, explaining where I was, and why I had left her. And I told her that I was alright.

After we finished basic training, we were selected for different combat squads. I was selected for what was called the *special unit*. It turned out that only a select few soldiers were sent to this program, and I was one of them! I've never felt special before, never felt, as if I was part of something. But now, I was part of a team.

If the basic training had been rough, this was hell. We had to swim for miles, learn to dive, repair tanks and battle-mechs, and when you finally fell into your bed after a day of training, they wake you up at three in the

morning, and have you defuse mines. Some days I was so exhausted, I collapsed crying.

But the lose group of recruits that we were also learned to work together. And to trust each other to a degree that I have never thought possible. They became my family.

And then came the day of our first deployment. There was some trouble in the middle east, as always and when that trouble conflicts with Uncle Sam's interests, we were dispatched to fix the troubles in our countries favour. I never asked what this was about, or why we were sent. Maybe I should have been a little more critical, but then: What would it have changed?

Our job was easy: Blow up a command and control centre behind enemy lines, to cripple the enemies ability to deploy their battle-mechs. I didn't realise back then, but this was the prelude to the Faro-Plague. Our mission was a full success: We destroyed the whole telemetry, and the autonomous robots, the rebels used in the battlefield were rendered completely useless. A member of the infantry I knew from our training later told me that, when they approached the battlefield, the enemy drones simply stopped moving. Flying drones fell from the sky as if they were turned off in mid-flight. It must have been a sight to behold. Of course the US mission HQ was a military success, and when we returned to our HQ we were treated like heroes. I was barely 18, and got my first medal of honour. I was proud and sent the bonus I received, together with a set of pictures we took on the base to my mother. My mum wasn't so happy about it, saying she doesn't want to lose me to a war, that "we are not part of". I didn't understand her back then, but I soon realised, that

the state I had risked my life for, didn't care in the least for my well being.

Despite our victory, the big heads in the Pentagon, that was the headquarters of the US-Military in that time, looked at it with concern: They used the same technology to control their drones as the Iranians. And if a team of five specialists could take out the entire military operation of US enemies, this could happen to our own troops as well. Their answer was: We need machines, that can act fully autonomously, just give them the goals, and let the artificial intelligence do everything else.

Faro industries had previously used swarms of inter operating intelligent robots to clean up the oceans from plastic, direct traffic and even perform surgery inside the human body. Most of it was based on the work of Elisabet Sobek. When the US-Military approached Faro to use the technology for military purposes, Ted Faro agreed to build the *Chariot* robots. These are the machines you know as *Deathbringers*. But Dr. Sobek left the company, refusing to work on weapons. This didn't stop Faro from building the *Chariots* in the end, but it delayed the plans but quite some time. To have something to present in the meantime, the U.S. Army and Faro industries devised the *Lazarus* project.

They did have a working prototype for the *Chariot* line, but no controlling AI. And without that, the slow and plump machines would be outmanoeuvred by the small single use drone swarms, we called *slaughterbots* back in the day. These were machines that used classical machine learning to do their jobs, so they could react in learned patterns, but they weren't a real AI, like the

machines Dr. Sobek had built.

When I was ordered back to the base in Iowa, I did not know, that I would not leave this place again as a human. They didn't tell us anything, they didn't warn us, and they surely didn't ask our consent. They just used us, like you'd use some old property.

