

Horizon Zero Dawn: Saving Time

Complete Edition

By John Davies

Prologue

2039 – Harriet Choi, a follower of the Naysay cult, is arrested for a terrorist attack in multiple cities around the globe that kills thousands. He is arrested and the cult known as Naysay proceeds to collapse. Mass arrests follow, but a few members escape. They have no idea that the world will end in less than thirty years.

My father and Grandfather both had a dream. Cryonics, a fad that had died out in the 1990's, was something they aspired to create. They dreamed of a future amongst the stars, where they could roam alien hills and look up at alien skies. But it was a dream cut short. There was a car crash when I was ten. This would have been in 54, I think. So much has happened since then. My mother was never in the picture, she passed away a year after I was born. I had no other family. Good thing for Auntie Liz, who took me in and taught me everything I knew. I wasn't a dumb child, far from it. I was in Harvard by the time I was fifteen and had developed cooling systems for all sorts of machines. But that woman had an intellect that far surpassed my own, or indeed that of anyone I knew. I owe my very survival to that woman. In 2159, I went to Harvard to study Organic Systems and Bio-Mechanics and met a man I would come to call friend, if nothing else. His name was Daniel Edwards, a 21-year old student studying Spatial Physics (time/space studies, essentially) and Advanced Computer Systems. Odd enough choices, But I guess anything goes. Who was I to judge, I followed my fathers' footsteps in studying Cryonics in my spare time. Made what I assumed was decent progress, though I later realised I was a long, long way off.

By 2059, Both me and David had graduated. He had gone off to Switzerland to work on the Hydron Collider. I decided to work at Miriam Technologies under Elizabet Sobeck. Yes, she was the one to take me in after my Father passed, odd how life works out in that way. But I wouldn't be here if not for her. Due to my studies and my interest in Cryonics, she had me work on adapting robots to colder climates, including robots sent to work on what remained of Antarctica. Went here myself a few times. Remarkable placed if nothing else. Wonder what it's like now? Anyway, There I stayed for the next five (?) years. It wasn't as if I wanted to go anywhere else. I was perfectly content with my work and where I had ended up in life. A good job, with decent pay and security in my future. I dare anyone else to say if they needed more than that.

In November 2064, I woke up, did my morning business like everybody else. But the news was about as dire as it could possibly get. I've never met Ted Faro, never had the desire to. Sobeck wasn't too flattering about him. Snake was what she called him, among less flattering

terms, though I always suspected there was something underneath all that resentment. I digress. The news was.... disturbing. Some of the latest robots to come out of FAS had gone rogue and there was no way to shut them down. The military was calling for volunteers since the machines could also hack other machines. Worse, they seemed to “feed” of any form of life using the very system my adoptive mother had designed. A perversion of all she had worked for.

Hours after the news broke, two government types “escorted” me to a facility just outside Denver. I didn’t see Sobeck in person and had suspected her to be involved in some project in some form. I knew that if the people in charge had any sense would place her in charge of anything they were trying to do. I was correct. A couple of presentations later and everything was laid bare. Sobeck was in charge. The machines were going to completely wipe out all life. There was nothing we could do to stop it, just plan for the inevitable. But Sobeck had a plan, because of course she did. How could she not? She was aware of my continuing research into Cryonics, and decided that I could be of benefit. Cryonics, simply put, is the freezing of living people with the idea of reviving them later. I couldn’t do people, yet, but zygotes and embryos? That was more than possible. I was bought on to do that on a massive scale. In the interview following the two presentations, I knew exactly what I wanted. I had to survive this plague. There was so much more that I wanted. A family, old age. I wanted to explore the world and I had wasted what little life I had on what? Ice and dirt. I formulated a plan quickly. Before I was “escorted” to Zero Dawn, I knew that whatever project they wanted me to take part in, family wouldn’t be considered an option. Travis taught me a lot about computers and I hacked my medical files to suggest I wasn’t capable of anything. If someone asked too many questions, well, I knew people at the top.

And that’s how my story started. I swore to myself that it would not end there. The next two years were the most important of my life, though I have had many since. My journey across time was a slow one, the long way round. But it was worth it.

Chapter 1: The Old World Blues

It didn't catch me off guard. The Faro Plague. In a sick way I always knew it was coming. I have no problem with machines that can sort through organic waste and use it as fuel. But when you use that system in a war machine then you have a loaded gun waiting to be fired. Now the world is tearing itself apart and all I can do is watch in silent horror as all my dreams for the future die with it. Hopes for a family, a legacy and even a chance to see the stars. All of it gone because some asshole at the top wanted to make a quick buck. Thing is, if this happened just twenty years ago, we might have been able to stop it. It's not the Scarabs or even the dreaded Kopesh that is the problem. Bring enough firepower down and they fall, or so the reports tell me anyhow. The Horus units. What asshole thought they were a good idea. I've heard rumours of them being destroyed in some places. Never believed it though. We have no air force. What infantry and heavy armour we could muster is inexperienced and ineffective. The fact that fighting is still going on outside surprises me. But still, no airforce means the Horus will always beat us to the curb. Always.

I walked into the interview for the project. It was a large room with a dozen other people in there. Some were crying, others were silent. One got into a fight with security and was escorted away. I was silent. I had no words. How could I after finding out that the world had been murdered. I sat down in front of this cute Indian girl. Siri I think her name was. I tried to focus on that singular positive. "How are you feeling Doctor," she asked me. I took moment to respond. "Just answer me this: Is Sobeck in charge?" She just looked at me before saying, "Yes, she is. She's been given complete control over Zero Dawn." A glimmer of unexpected hope must have appeared within my eyes. "Are you... okay?" I'm guessing she wasn't expecting me to smile. I knew what I needed to do. "Absolutely. I would like to help as much as I can," I almost sang in a gleeful manner. This really did catch her off guard. "Uhhh, okay. Let me just get your medical file up. I need to make you aware that you're not allowed children during, or after, the project is finished," she began to explain. I simply interrupted her with, "I'm guessing there's a place for all us researchers to go then?" She looked at me. "Yes. Elysium is where we'll end up. I'm sure you understand that sterilisation is necessary? Due to the limited resources we can't have children after going into Elysium or continuing with the project... um. That's odd. Your medical file says you had elective surgery late last year? is that correct?" Bingo. There was about two hours between the announcement on the news and the Men in Black picking me up. Let's just say Travis taught me well. "Yes, that's correct. It was part of my decision to focus entirely on my career. I guess it was for the best." I could barely hide my optimism for the future. Poor girl must of thought I was insane. "I'm going to recommend a psych evaluation. Then you can get to work."

Two security members came to escort me, supposedly for a psych evaluation. Before they could, I spotted Daniel, my old university friend. We hadn't spoken in over a year at this point, so I was excited to talk to him once more. I shouted him over. "Hey Daniel! Over here!" He came over with a sullen look. Couldn't blame him really. "Hey, you're here too? That news was harsh," he gloomed and doomed. During the interview, we were given three options. Lockup, assisted suicide or work on the project. I chose that third option, as did Daniel. Apparently he was working on a form of cold fusion batteries, but somehow they wanted him to work on the fusion reactors to power everything. "What do they want with you," he asked. "Cooling systems. I'm an expert in cryonics, so there's that too," I replied. I could tell he was tired. Everybody looked tired, but how else would they look? After a very brief discussion, we both went to where we needed to go.

A month later and I was working under Patrick Brochard-Klien. I can't believe how easy the work was. You have any idea how far we managed to get in regards to freezing zygotes? The problem was keeping them viable over centuries. As I said, the work was easy. Regardless, I worked on my own plan. The world was ending, but I would not die with it. If we could keep zygotes viable over centuries, what's to stop us from doing the same with people? So I worked and worked. One day, I got visited by Aunt Liz (Yes, privately, I still called her that), and she wasn't looking too good. "Hey Aunt," I said excitedly. She looked at me with that look. Stress had overtaken her life. "I see you're adapting well. How are you taking the news," she asked me. What could I say. "As well as anyone. Mind you, I haven't given it that much thought," I said, not wanting to set her off. Sobeck loved life, as much if not more than anything. "If I'm honest, I've been too busy working to give it any thought. Mind you, I could've done without the piss poor coffee." My lame attempt at a joke got her to crack a smile. "I hear you've been working on a secret project in secret. want to fill me in on that," Sobeck asked me in that stern tone. Of course she was keeping check on me. "Well, I thought long and hard on my father's research," I started to explain, "What if we could use it to send someone into the future, to ensure the success of Zero Dawn." Sobeck thought for a moment. "You know we don't have the time or resources for this right," she softened her voice for this. My father spent his life working towards trying to work out cryonics. "I know. That's why I'm only doing it in my spare time. I know as well as anyone Zero Dawn comes first." She thought for a moment. "I'm pulling you from the Zero Dawn project. If this research pans out, maybe we could use it." Sobeck seemed hesitant, almost as if she's hiding something. I perked up to this and asked, "there's something wrong isn't there? There's no reason for this if there wasn't." Sobeck suddenly became more serious than usual. "Faro has perhaps too much regret. He's been up to something but I don't know what. It helps to have a back-up plan," she spoke with that stressed out tone of hers. "Okay. What do you need me to do," I asked. She simply responded, "give me hope."

February 2065. I've been working on this secret project since early December. Sobeck had me relocated to Elysium and gave me a small team. A doctor, a biologist and two engineers. The doctor was none other than the woman who interviewed me. One Doctor Siri Rasheed. She was familiar with human anatomy and psychology, which worked well for me as I needed both. The biologist was Professor Kelsey Jones from the University of London. He'd been an expert in cell structure and the effects of freezing. He'd also done computer science in a former life hence his inclusion. The three engineers were three brothers – David, Harry and Milton Williams. David had been in the military years before as an engineer, but his knowledge on keeping things running no matter what had a reputation of it's own. His one condition for working with me? His two brothers had to come with him. Not a bad deal as they were both engineers. Milton had even worked with Daniel in the past. How small the world really is I guess. With this team together, I had actually made some real progress. We had prototypes tested on mice and rats. Only thing we could get. Mixed results. Apparently freezer burn was a problem and the subjects didn't like it. Kelsey made a comment that I still remember to this day. He said, "This thing will make us immortal, but only if we don't wake up." He wasn't far off. We wouldn't be dead, but we wouldn't be "alive" either.

The end of February came as did another visit by way of Sobeck. She had some spare time (a few hours in fact) and wanted to see how it was all going. "How is your project going," she asked. "We've made more progress in the last three months than we have in the last three generations. I say progress is going well," I responded. "That's good. How far away from human testing are you?" I stuttered for a moment. "Human testing? We're not quite there yet,

even if we're allowed to do that." Sobeck looked at me like I was insane. "Of course you are. We need this to work. So long as your subjects volunteer for it of course," she explained. The stress had overcome her. She was looking gaunt. She hadn't been eating or sleeping much. It appalled me that the smartest person I've ever known is being torn apart by the unstoppable forces behind her. After this visit, I went back to work.

"You know something," Siri spoke with that beautiful Indian accent of hers. "What," I asked. "I think we can mitigate the lack of stem cells by increasing adrenaline before we enter cryo," she explained. We had problems with cell rupture and were trying to figure out. "Let's give it a shot," I agreed. Me and Siri had a thing going. It may have affected our working relationship. What can I say, she was quite the gal. "What does Kelsey say?" Siri didn't bother looking up to say, "Don't know. I suppose I should go ask him to set up some experiments." I didn't know why, but something had happened that caused those two to avoid each other whenever necessary. Couldn't replace either of them. I don't think there could be anyone who would be able to replace them at all. "Don't bother, I'll do it. If you need me, I'll be in his lab," I said, getting up from my chair. She didn't respond, more engrossed with her work than anything.

Walking towards the other lab occupied by my team, I decided to talk with the three brothers. They were currently working on a project that would allow us to survive off our own separate power grid. Elysium wasn't built to last beyond 100 years, and the reactor installed showed just how little longevity was meant for the last home of the old world. Sure, it was reliable. Chances were that it would never fail given the proper maintenance. But it was only certified to last 150 years. If we were to have any hope of surviving the long passages of time, we needed our own power. Fortunately for us, Milton had a plan. "Hey boss, I have an idea about power," he excitedly told me, "We already have a power source." I was surprised. Normally it would take months to design a battery capable of running months, let alone the centuries we would need to sleep for. "And that would be..." Harry pulled out a small metallic cylinder. It looked vaguely like a battery, but seemed to be incredibly bulky and was the size of a large suitcase. On the one side there was an LED indicator completely lit up in green. "What is it," I asked. "A fusion battery," Milton shared excitedly, "basically a miniaturised fusion reactor. This puppy can power a city for an hour." "Seriously, this thing can do all that?" I gave him a puzzled look. "We have access to about twelve of these things, though I know for a fact more exist," David said. He had a rather brutish sound to his voice, most likely from years of heavy smoking and drinking. I asked, "where? Surely these things aren't already available?" "You're right. They're not. Daniel Edwards had them designed for some special project he was doing which never panned out." I heard Daniel was trying out some experiments, but why would he need these batteries? "What special project?" Milton didn't know. Daniel didn't give engineers the highest regard, liked to top day everything himself. "You said there were more?" David explained that there was only two dozen of the batteries in existence and that he knew that half of them were in Switzerland. Where the other half a dozen were was a mystery, as they had disappeared when Daniels pet project was shut down. I suspected he stole them. He wouldn't be above that at all considering how ambitious he was.

After finishing with the brothers and dealing with Doctor Kelsey, I decided to send a message to Sobeck. I asked if it were possible to get these remaining batteries. On a more personal level, I asked if everything was alright with her. I was more than a little concerned about her

health, and with things being the way they were it was important that she got enough sleep to work properly. She responded by saying she'd look into the fusion batteries. She wouldn't go into details about her not sleeping, though I could tell by her tone that it wasn't foremost on her mind. That bothered me that she wasn't thinking about her own health. This woman helped raised me and it saddened me to see her suffer in the way she was.

August came around and we'd finally done it. The first fully functioning cryo-pod for a living human being had been built, tested and was in the process of being modified. The three engineers were absolutely certain they could modify it to make it more efficient, more reliable. I gave them two weeks. David said he could do it in one. I almost laughed. They're good., though, I had to give them that. Sobeck had been here since February (?) but I was still giving her updates. But now she was giving us a visit, undoubtedly under the premise of ensuring Elysium was on schedule but really to see if the team had really done it. I set up an experiment involving both Siri and Kelsey after they practically begged to show off a demonstration to Sobeck. I told them it wasn't necessary but she indicated she was somewhat excited to see the demonstration. It would be the start – and unfortunately end – of a new scientific field. Even in the backdrop of the war that had some meaning to us still. We were fighting against the inevitable with solid determination and unwavering ambition to survive this nightmare. The day came and Sobeck turned up in a very timely manner. “Are you absolutely sure it works,” she asked me. “Yes. Doctor Kelsey has spent the last two weeks inside one of the three prototypes and is scheduled to wake up today,” I explained. We entered the room designated as the cryo-room. It was a large room, the size of an auditorium. The three cryo-pods were on the opposite side of the room. Siri and Milton were hovering the one containing an unfortunately fully nude, covered only by the design of the cryo-pods door. Both me and Sobeck walked up. Siri came up to greet us. “We're about to open the pod when you're both ready,” she told us. Sobeck nodded at me confirming that she was ready to observe the procedure. “Do it. Just make sure to record everything,” I told her.

Milton sat down at the dedicated holo-face (holographic interface) for the cryo-pod and initiated the waking up procedure. The cryo-pod drained of the specialised liquid before pumping Kelsey full of the adrenaline needed to wake him up. Slowly, but surly, he began to wake up. Siri kept an eye on his vitals as the pods doors hissed open. “Procedure complete. Give us a moment and he'll be on his feet,” Siri announced. I glanced back at Sobeck and realised that she actually looked speechless. “How's his condition,” I asked. “He'll be fine. Heart rate is normal, cognitive functions are normal, blood pressure is normal. Adrenaline is returning to normal so he'll be fine. It was at this point Sobeck turned to me and said “how many of these can you make?” I was prepared for this. She always wanted to do what she could to save as many people as possible. But I was about to disappoint her. “Fifteen, maximum. Each one has one fusion battery and enough stasis liquid for 1,000 years. Any less and the redundant systems won't work. The remaining three fusion batteries are redundancy and systems,” I explained, “which reminds me...” She looked at me concerned about what I was about to say. “Yes?” “I was hoping to put together a team to sleep out the next few hundred years...” Her eyes widened over this request. “You know I can't spare anyone...” I interrupted her. “I wasn't talking about someone from the Zero Dawn project. I mean from out there.” She almost choked out on that last part, before saying, “We need to speak in private.”

Ten minutes later and we were in my office, with her screaming at me. About how I needed to keep this quiet. I couldn't save those on the front line and there were better qualified people who were in Elysium but not needed for Zero Dawn. I replied, rather sternly, that we didn't know what the future would be like. I wanted a squad of EXPERIENCED soldiers off the frontline. They knew how to scrap machines better than anyone if it ever came to that. She said that it would be impossible. That's when General Herres interrupted (via hologram of course). "Doctors," he announced. Sobeck took a long look. "I'm guessing he called you here," she annoyed at the general. "Yes, he did. And I think he has a point. As for his plan, I am fully prepared to take a squad off the front line if means saving some lives." Sobeck looked at Herres and simply sighed in defeat. She couldn't argue with his reasoning, or mine as a matter of fact. "Okay. I'll allow it. But this needs to be done quietly. If anyone in Elysium hears about this, who knows what could happen," she explained to me. "Okay. Then we'll sneak them in. I already have an idea of the sort of squad I want, and will see to them personally." This statement surprised both Sobeck and Herres, as if they expected me to devolve that responsibility. "What do you mean, you see to it personally," Sobeck demanded to know. "I mean, with the generals permission, I will select the candidates myself and talk to them personally, even if it means going into the front line," came my response, "I've already discussed my requirements with General Herres and he has provided me with a list of names. If all goes well, I'll have a selection by the end of the month." I saw the uneasiness in both of them. I half expected Sobeck to deny permission for me to move forward, but it was General Herres who spoke first. "Very well, I'll have an escort for you in two days. Best I can do, which is better than most everyone." Sobeck never said anything as my and the General made our plans.

The details of how I came to get the soldiers under my employ is.... difficult. As I said I would, I went as far as joining the frontline to secure the people I wanted. The things I saw I'll never forget. You haven't seen hell until you see a titan "harvest" an entire trench of people in order to refuel. Like a mid-air blender, but much worse. Scarabs and Kopesh all over the place. Good people were killed, if not worse. Oh god, it was the worst I had ever seen. Will ever see in my lifetime. The names of the men who joined the team don't matter, as will become apparent. They played no further part in my journey other than that small time we had together.

January 15th 2066: The Wichita Defence in Kansas has collapsed. Elysium is on its own. Most everybody is already here, and the last few transports will be here in the next few hours. Whether they'll make it is another thing entirely. I often wondered if I made the right call in the cryo-pods. I'd be leaving over 1,600 people to live out their lives as I slept into the future, never knowing their pain. I suspected many would end their lives in the first few years. Who wouldn't in this tomb. By the time that the doors sealed themselves, everyone but me and Siri were in cryo-sleep. She was unsure about going in, whilst I couldn't wait to see the new world. While she making final checks on the vitals of everyone, I was checking in on the computer systems that were meant to keep us alive. We didn't have an AI, just a complicated series of computers. There were also two servitors that were designated to maintain the area in which the cryo-pods were staying. As far as I could tell, everything worked fine. The Williams Brothers knew what they were doing. After we both finished our final duties, me and Siri shared one final embrace. "Why do I get the feeling like we never going to see each other again," she asked. "Relax, we sleep for a bit then spend the rest of our lives together. If Kelsey is to be believed, we won't even notice the time difference. We'll never feel time passing," I tried to comfort her. She had been the most worried about the project. I didn't

share her views. "I know it'll work, I just want to be safe about it," she had repeated from a thousand different conversations. "I know, so do I," I once again comforted. As we finished our embrace, we both prepared for the next stage of our journey. The process had been automated by Milton before he entered cryo, so all we had to do was get in. I looked Siri over one last time before getting in and being put to sleep by the machine that would allow me to enter the new world.

I woke up in what felt like was mere moments later. I fell to the ground, throwing up the liquid that had formed in my stomach. I was so busy with this task that I failed to see the empty cryo-pods where my friends had once been. One of the servitors came up to me and in its robotic voice told me, "remain calm, sir. You have been in cryo for far longer than expected." I realised what she said and responded with, "How long were we out." "You have been woken after numerous attempts. It has been 974 years since your entry into cryo-sleep," the robot explained. I threw up again. "The others have been awake for an unknown number of years." That stopped me. "What do you mean, unknown number of years?" The servitor explained how the various members of the team, including the soldiers, had been awakened separately for the past 600 years. Siri had been awakened alongside the three Williams brothers over 80 years ago. "How come I haven't been woken up until now?" The machine replied with, "repairs to your cryo-pod have only just allowed it." I checked the computer logs. When the reactor for Elysium shut down, somehow it caused an EMP blast damaged some of the systems that were meant to wake us up. I was alone. I looked around, seeing that there truly wasn't anyone else around. I even checked out the rest of Elysium. All I found was corpses, a thousand years dead. Eventually, I managed to find the main door out of this metal tomb I found myself in only to find it open. Through the opening, I saw a hint of blue and green as the sun blinded me and I began to walk forward. My story was only about to begin.

Chapter 2: New Worlds

After waking from cryo, I was confused. The nearly 1,000 years in stasis had taken its toll, however temporary it may be. It took me three days to come to my senses and even then it took me a long time to even become fully aware of my surroundings. Only after about a week did I realise that I was hungry. Only then did I realise that I had to leave this empty tomb of the old world in order to survive. Technically, the door to Elysium was a massive hanger where transport pods came in to deposit the helpless few inside. After the final pods came in, the doors were sealed, never to be re-opened. But when I reached the door, it was slightly open, not very far mind you, just far enough for a few people to get through. It makes sense; no food, water and very little keeping them here meant that my former companions had to open the door to leave. Approaching the door, I was blinded by the door from the sun. I hadn't seen the sun for a thousand years, and my eyes needed readjusting. Once they did, I was stunned by the beauty of this new world. There were snow-capped mountains all around me. But below me.... there was a forest as green as it could be. And beyond it, I could see what I thought was the remains of Colorado Springs. My mouth agape, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Zero Dawn had clearly worked. I rushed towards it, not even caring that I was hungry anymore.

It took me a long time to get down off the mountain. The road that had once been here hadn't existed for so long, there wasn't a single point where any of it remained. Along the way, I saw berries and pine cones and remembered. I was grateful that one of the soldiers from before had taught me about edible plants, meaning I could get some food – not much, but some. I didn't stop though, if Gaia was successful in bringing humans back into the world, then there may have been some in what little remained in Colorado Springs. The forest was eerily quiet. There were birds in the sky, and I was certain I could hear the occasional insect buzzing around. After what felt like days, I finally arrived towards the ruins of the long-dead city. There were no more roads and any building smaller than a skyscraper had long since disappeared. There were still remains of the old tanks used by us humans in the war against the machines and even some traffic lights of all things. It was rather intimidating, being in the ruins of a dead world, slowly being covered by the life of the new world. I saw wild boar, hares, foxes and all sorts of other wildlife but no signs of any other humans. At this point, I didn't even know if there were other humans in the world. For all I know, Gaia hadn't got there yet.

Scouring the ruins of this long dead city, I came upon a clearing. It was surrounded at the outermost edge by a forest on the far side and the ruins on my side. There were also bits of tall grass and rocky outcrops that could've been bits of building or metal, but would've aged too much to tell any difference. But the most interesting thing was the lone machine in the centre. It was as tall as a man, but was incredibly long. It almost looked like one of those old depictions of dinosaurs you saw in a museum. It had no arms and a single eye on the head. The way it moved was almost animalistic in a sense, as if it had some natural purpose. Before I could react or move closer, several more machines moved into view out of the forest. Some were like the ones already in the clearing, whilst others looked more like horses. I watched for several hours as these machines did what I assumed they were meant to, before moving on.

I slept in a hole I had dug and had filled with leaves and grass. On top of that, I had managed to get a fire going, so at least I was warm. Honestly, I wasn't that tired and barely slept at all. I guess sleeping for as long as I did takes it out of you. It would take me just over a day to get to Gaia Prime. I was hoping with any luck that she would let me in. There was a lot about this new world that I didn't know, and she was just the AI I needed.

As soon as the sun rose over the horizon, I started walking north. I noticed a variety of machines, including some that looked like deer and others that looked like birds. Some were familiar to me (as they had been designs before the restoration began) and others were completely new. Oddly, some had no function outside combat, which I found to be peculiar at least. This gave me an uneasy feeling, as combat machines often would to anyone. I chose to stay clear of any machines due to this. The sun was high when I came across the most horrifying sight; a horde of Scarabs and Kopesh standing as still as could be. There were only a dozen of them, but you could tell that they were active recently due to the vegetation around them – or lack thereof. I had seen a Titan on the distance, clearly destroyed or offline judging by any lack of recent geology changes. But this was almost as bad. I stupidly moved closer, taking notice of the disturbed dirt. They had clearly been buried and had been “woken” up recently, though I didn't know how recently. I didn't waste time trying to find out as I flat out ran north, hoping to make it before they woke up again.

One thing I didn't account for was the geology. The world was so different than it had been that I almost didn't recognise it. Before I went on ice, there was never anything like that mountain range that lay before me. It was small, but yet large enough to have snow-tipped peaks. It would take me several days to get over them, judging by their size. But if I wanted to get to Gaia, then I had no other choice but to travel over them. It was at that point I missed the finer luxuries of my old life.

The journey to the base of these mountains was longer than I would have liked, as I worked to avoid active and dead machines alike. As I grew closer, I realised what the mountain range was. Eleuthia-9 was buried under that mountain range. I guess I was quicker than I thought. And closer. The mountains were like giants compared to myself. The forest had started to thin out as the mountain grew closer, leaving me to enter a field of boulders. It would take me a while to find a path to the other side, seeing how I didn't really have any mountain climbing equipment or experience. I never had time to learn before the world ended, though I never wanted to either. It was only when I started making my hike to the top that I started hearing what sounded like whispering all around me. I never saw anyone by this point, so I just played it off as my senses messing up. I was cold, tired and hungry by this point.

The air got thin as I neared the top of the mountains. It had gotten harder to keep going but I needed to get to the other side. Chances were, if Eleuthia-9 did its job then there was a good chance that people had stayed by the cradle. Well I hoped. I had reached the top and had to take a minute. Not only was I out of breath, but the view in front of me was spectacular. I was looking down on the remains of Denver, but also on a hidden paradise. The mountain descended into a large valley stuck in between four mountain ranges. The land was green and white, almost Christmas like. The ruins of the old city were almost beautiful, completely betraying what they represented. Far off in the distance in front of me I could see the mountain which Gaia was in. That's when I noticed the biggest and most concerning issue.

The top of the mountain had looked like it blown off, as if someone detonated a nuclear bomb inside the mountain. Hope began to fade as I saw the sight that lay before me. Gaia had obviously re-seeded life – but how far did she get? I had to get over there and find out, humanity and sights be damned.

Getting down was quicker, though not necessarily easier. I had gotten halfway down and into a almost flat area of trees when I realised that I had stumbled into a trap. From the trees came a number of men who looked more savage than any machine or beast that I could think of to remember. I counted four men, all of whom seemed better equipped for the environment than myself. None of them spoke, and I saw no overt signs of any other type of communication. They surrounded me, intent on not letting me get away. Within seconds, the one that was behind me grabbed me by the arms. Without hesitation, the others moved in. They beat me, and kicked me. Soon enough, I was on the floor bleeding from the wounds i had been given. By now, the men had to have realised that I had nothing for them to steal. Without a word, three of them proceed into various directions, or maybe just one. I couldn't tell. The fourth one, and the largest of the group, took out what looked like a knife of sorts and stabbed me in my side before leaving. Looking back, I can only assume that they took pleasure in knowing I would die alone and without hope. Before passing out thought I saw someone I knew. A flick of red hair reminded me of the woman who raised me, and who made this new world possible. I could only get one word out before passing out completely. All I could say was, "Sobeck...." in nothing more than a whisper.....

Chapter 3: Nora Tribe

I woke up in a haze of confusion. I was no longer in the snow. Instead, it looked like a cabin, or a mud hut or maybe a cross between the two. I was having difficulty remembering how I got here or really anything that happened, though the pain in my side was a good indicator. I struggled to get up and promptly failed due to the pain. Turning my head to see what I could, I noticed how simple the place looked. Next to me was a small table with wet and dry clothes, what I hoped was salt and a bowl of water. I was clearly being attended to. Clutching my side, I started to remember. I was stabbed by someone. Why? Why was I stabbed and left to die when I had nothing? Or perhaps the question answered itself. I couldn't be sure. This world was so different than the one I left who could tell what new culture had sprung up in the place of the Old World. As for the rest of this wooden hut, it was barren apart from what looked like a single fur rug on the floor. The air had a hostile taste to it, as if the very environment itself didn't want me there. But I couldn't ignore the fact that my wound had been treated. So many questions, like strings pulling me in opposite directions.

Hours came and went without a single visitor. That is, until an elderly woman came into the tent. She wore a strange headdress made out of wood and metal and heavy clothing that seemed modestly ornate. "I see that you are awake," she asked. Her tone seemed somewhat abrasive, as if I wasn't wanted here. "Where am I? What am I doing here," came my response. "You were saved by a seeker of the tribe as you attempted to cross the mountain," she explained, "A small group of bandits must have attacked you and left you for dead." I fought against the pain to sit up properly. "Who are you," came my next question. "I am High Matriarch Teersa. You within Nora territory, a rare occurrence if I may say so," Teersa told me, "If I may, you came over the mountain. Why would you risk such a perilous journey." She gave me a concerned look, but in a way that showed she considered me a potential threat. Given my environment, I wanted to keep as much to myself as possible. "I was fleeing north, where I hoped to find another of my tribe," I lied. Teersa looked at me with a slight horror in her eyes. "Who did you expect to find? Are you planning something against the Nora?" There was a distinct sound of fear in her voice. "My tribe is dead. Killed by machines. I'm looking for....," I paused, thinking about what to say, "survivors. I heard there was one up north. I needed to cross the mountain range first though." She hesitantly calmed down a bit. I wondered for a moment if she caught me in the lie, but I really couldn't tell. "I would ask how your tribe was killed by machines, but after what I have seen I suppose I shouldn't ask....," Teersa started to walk to the exit of the hut, "but that can come later. First, the seeker who saved you has some questions. She was quite insistent." I perked up. "It sounds like this seeker of yours is real important," I half-asked/half-stated. Teersa took one last look at me. "Both her and her guardian have done a lot for the Nora, and she personally has my trust and respect. She's earned that at least. I'll leave you two to discuss what you have to say by your selves," she further stated, before leaving the hut in a hurried state.

Moments later a red head walked in and I was shocked to my core. This seeker was none other than an exact woman who had raised me, except younger and with longer hair. Those eyes, though, were different. Within them I saw a confident young girl who's had a lifetime of experience. "Why, this was rather unexpected," I spoke out loud before laughing. She looked at me slightly confused. "What's so funny," the red haired girl asked. I said, laughing, "you look exactly like this scientist I knew. The similarity is so similar I could say you were a clone." "I am," she said with total seriousness. I stopped laughing. "Wait, what," I gasped. "I'm a clone of an old one. Elisabet was her name. Elisabet Sobeck," she said. Thoughts

instantly ran through my mind. If she was lying, then how did she know that name? And how did she look so similar? I decided to ask her. "How do you know that name?" "She's... my mother. I found out after a machine called Hades tried to kill me," the clone said. "Hades? As in the sub-function of Gaia? Impossible," I almost screamed. "Not so. There was apparently a signal shortly before my birth. Hades got free. Gaia sacrificed herself to make me and slow Hades down." "What proof do you have," I demanded, now panicking. "I have the file on my focus, if you can see it," she offered, slightly unnerved by my emotional state. "You have a focus? Let me see the file."

After giving me her focus and after viewing multiple files, I was devastated by what I found out. Gaia was indeed gone and Hades had tried to end the world once again by using the spires set up by MINERVA to reactivate the Faro Plague. I remembered the field of Scarabs and Kopesch I came across. I also learned that Apollo had been deactivated by Ted Faro. I was disheartened to hear about Sobecks death and of how it happened. But I'm glad she at least died for something unlike the others. I mourned for them all. Giving the seeker back her focus, I could barely contain my sadness. I was alone in this world. My only connection was my memories. "What is your name," I asked her. "Aloy," she responded, "This seems... too much for you. Are you going to be alright?" I didn't say a word. I couldn't muster any semblance of thought in my grief.

It would be several days before I came out of my depression and was able to speak. When I did pull myself together, I just needed fresh air. My wound had by this time healed enough that whilst painful, wasn't in any danger of reopening. There was a set of clothes where the bowl had been and put them on. They were more comfortable than I thought they'd be. I left the hut for the first time in god knows how long. I was surprised by what I saw. It was like looking back in time to observe the Native Americans before European settlers arrived. People were going about their daily lives, though I did notice that I got more than a few dirty glances from them. The air was fresh unlike the filtered air I grew up with. I started to wander around, but didn't get far as Matriarch Teersa began to approach me alongside Aloy. "You should know outsider that it is not safe for you to be wondering around alone. Many of the Nora believe allowing an outsider to be taboo," I heard her panicking. "Taboo? I don't understand..." I stuttered before the matriarch forced me back into the hut. Aloy followed suit, clearly not as concerned about my current situation as the older woman was. "I don't understand? What taboo am I breaking," I asked. Teersa spent some time explaining to me that outsiders were normally not allowed on Nora land and that the only reason I was here was because of Aloy. "I suppose I should be grateful that I'm still alive." I smiled weakly at that. "Yes, well. Unfortunately, I'd love to ensure you don't get into anymore trouble but I have other duties that I must attend to. Aloy will guide you should you have any more questions," Teersa told me before hastily leaving.

Once again I was left alone with the clone of the woman who raised me and an uncomfortable silence fell on the pair of us. Aloy, of course, was the first to speak. "It must be hard getting used to this world. Especially after leaving what you did," she said. "Yeah. This is a new world for me. Not an unwelcome one though. Fate would have taken my future from me if not for the cryo-pods my team and I developed. I just wish they were here," I let out. Aloy for her part reacted as if this was all normal. It was refreshing to get it off my chest. "Where's your team now," she asked. "Truthfully, I don't know. There was a problem with the opening of the pods and we were let out randomly over the many centuries. The three

engineers on the team made their attempts to repair the pods but obviously failed. I came out 80 years after the last of my team,” I explained, “I don’t really know what happened to them after that. I just hope they got to do what they wanted.” “What will you do now,” she asked. I sat on one of the chairs next to the bed. “I don’t know. I can’t stay here, obviously. And I don’t feel like wandering around aimlessly waiting for something to happen.” “Why don’t you go to Meridian,” Aloy asked. “What’s Meridian,” I asked back. “It’s a city to the west. It’s the capitol of Carja territory. I know people there,” Aloy said, with a faint smile. “If the Nora can’t leave the Scared Lands, then how do you know people there, or that there’s even a city there?” “Seekers are allowed to go beyond the borders if they have to. I’ve been there several times,” came the answer. I thought about it, though both of us knew we had no choice. “Alright, suppose I do go. What do I do when I get there,” I asked. “You could join the army. They accept outsiders.” I laughed out loud. “What makes you think they’ll take me? I just entered this land for the first time a week ago,” I told her. “Like I said, I know people. Besides, it’s not like you got anywhere else to go,” Aloy said, much more sternly than before. “Who are the Carja anyway?” This singular question led to Aloy teaching me about the various tribes nearby and how they functioned. For the most part I kept my mouth shut. I learnt quite a lot from her in regards to the local area and in turn I told her about the world I left. In particular, she was interested in Dr. Sobeck. It made sense; she spent her whole life not knowing who her mother was and even then only had second and third hand recordings. We’d continue like this for several days, with her bringing me food and us continuing to have these conversations. After a the first few days it actually became enjoyable rather than awkward, predominately because she was my primary human contact in this world, though Matriarch Teersa would come check up on me every once in a while.

Within two weeks of my arrival into this strange new land, it was deemed I was able to leave. The Matriarchs came to the hut and informed me that I was unable to stay for much longer, though Aloy had offered to take me to the main Carja city of Meridian. The matriarchs agreed to let her accompany me and I too gladly accepted it. It wasn’t just a question of not knowing anyone else, but honestly not knowing how to do anything just yet. I felt the previously oppressive atmosphere lift as we neared the border to the Nora land, which at that point Aloy made mention of the braves who had been following us. I didn’t even realise we were being followed, but she assured me that they wouldn’t follow us any further as we left for Carja land. I found myself exited for the next chapter in this little journey of my life.

Chapter 4: Joining the Carja

It took us two days to get to Daytower, the official edge of Carja territory. The Carja had already set up a few camps in the no man's land in between both Carja and Nora land. But Daytower wasn't just some collection of bedding and camp fires. It was a military fort, much like those used by the Romans. "It's impressive," I told Aloy. The look on her face told me that this was all old news to her. "There's a captain here. Captain Balahn. We'll check in with him before we continue west," she explained. Entering the Carja encampment, I was further amazed by the construction of the walls and buildings. The Nora were still living in wooden huts made out of twigs and sticks, while the Carja were building towers and protective walls. It was like comparing cave men to the Romans. Perhaps I could find somewhere to live in Meridian after all. It took us mere moments to pass the guards in their elaborate armour and reach a balcony that looked all over the desert that the Carja called home. At the balcony was a man who seemed distracted. Aloy beckoned me to wait where I was, just out of earshot, and walked up to the man who I assumed to be Captain Balahn. They talked for about five minutes before Aloy came back. "Well, the roads are fine, but we may want to steer clear of any shortcuts," she told me. "Why's that," I asked. "Because the machines in the area are getting out of hand. The Carja are spreading their resources too thin. They can't manage it," she explained, "right now, the king is focusing on making sure the roads are as safe as possible. That and sorting out the remnants of the Eclipse." I knew of them from Aloy's focus. Funny how humanity always had doomsday cults. After resupplying, we were on our way to Meridian.

Along the way, I noticed how many patrols were on the road. No wonder the roads were safe, though I could also understand how the Carja were spreading themselves too thin. Too many patrols on the roads. In the distance I could spot the Spire – actually a broadcast tower for MINERVA – but I couldn't yet see Meridian. "We'll keep following the road till we get to Meridian," Aloy commanded. She had as much confidence in her decisions as her "mother", which assured me in a great many ways. "If I may, why help me," I asked her. "Why not. I'd rather keep moving anyway, rather than stay in one place. The Embrace isn't home for me. I don't think it ever will be," she explained, "This way, I get to go back to Meridian." We didn't stop moving while we talked. "What's Meridian like," I asked. "It's impressive. I've never seen anything like it," Aloy replied, "A lot of people too. I haven't seen so many people in one place before then." I was happy that, despite Apollo being offline, that civilisation was being rebuilt. I wondered if a similar thing was happening all over the world? "As anyone ever seen the world beyond these valleys? What do you know about the larger world," I enquired. "I don't know. I know there are nomadic tribes to the west, but beyond that I can't say," Aloy told me. "The world seems so large yet small. In the old world, we could travel many thousands of miles in just a few hours. A person could see everything there is to see in just a few years," I explained. "Sounds pretty amazing," Aloy responded. I followed up with, "Not if you wanted to learn. By the time I was 20, most everything had been discovered as it were, save for a few hold outs."

The road was long. Three days and we still weren't there. Aloy decided that would be better if I knew how to fight. She taught me how to craft a spear out of machine parts and taught me some very basic fighting. I suppose it's a good thing that I'm a quick learner. When she wasn't teaching me how to use a spear, we were either making our way towards Meridian or hunting for our next meal. Suffice to say, since we left the Embrace I had learnt a lot more than I thought I would. It helped that I had a great teacher. Even after a thousand years,

Sobeck was still teaching me all I knew, literally and figuratively. I found that particularly ironic. After about a week travelling through both Nora and Carja land, we arrived at an overlook that gave us a pretty amazing view of the city. It wasn't the clearest view, but I saw enough to be astounded. "How long before we get there," I asked. "We'll be there tomorrow, we'll set up and camp out for the night," Aloy replied. "What's going to happen when we get there," I enquired. "There's a man I know, Blameless Marad. If there's work for you, he'll know about it," Aloy said cautiously. "You don't sound too confident." "He works for the king as a spymaster. It'll be an odd request, but hopefully he will help." I didn't have to learn what spymaster meant. "What are the chances he knows about me," I asked. "Well, considering I sent him a letter while you were passed out, very good." This answer surprised me. "I didn't take you for a writer." Aloy looked at me and said, "The focus taught me how to read. It wasn't that difficult to learn how to write. I occasionally send letter to Marad and he returns the favour. I have quite a few friends in Meridian." "If that's so, then why don't you leave the Nora behind and stick with the Carja?" "If it were that easy, I would. My adoptive father, Rost, was loyal to the Nora to the end. I couldn't forgive myself if I betrayed that part of him," she quietly said to me. I didn't say anything. She became upset at the thought of him, but hid it well. "Suppose we should finish off the meat we got before entering the city. I'll get the fire going," I said before collecting the firewood.

The following day greeted us with unexpectedly pleasant weather. The sun was out and there was no cloud in the sky, almost as if to welcome us to the very city we were about to enter. Aloy explained to me that the only way to enter the city was via a bridge, which itself was an outright impossible feat of construction. But the real joy was the city itself. I had grown up with skyscrapers and colonies on the moon and Mars, but I could explain how that was possible. This world didn't have any of that knowledge, and yet had still created all this. As Aloy had told me, the city was bustling with life. Having grown up in a city, it put me at ease as if I was returning to some semblance of normalcy. The sights, sounds, smells all threatened to overwhelm me and I was more than tempted to let it. "Marad should be meeting us near the lower market," Aloy said. She led the pair of us to a market place full of spices and foodstuff. We waited for quite a while, talking about the market. I saw several food items I recognised, such as Maize and Corn, but other more weirder fruits and vegetables. Before I could take a closer look, Aloy drew my attention to a man approaching. He made no effort to draw attention to himself and seemed to move almost effortlessly. "Blameless Marad. Didn't expect to see you personally," Aloy said cheerfully. "The sun king has kindly allowed me to put some time aside for you and your friend." He gave me a quick look over. "He has assured me that any friend of yours will be welcome here, so long as he doesn't cause any trouble," Marad continued. "I won't be," I spoke out loud. "We'll see. Work is hard to come by if you wish to look for it. Whilst I can't guarantee your chances privately, there is a possibility that you can join the army," Marad explained to me. I was a bit surprised by this. "Why would the Carja military accept me? I'm an outsider," I asked without a hint of malice. "They won't know that. Besides, a friend of Aloy is a friend of the Carja. She seems to be a good judge of character." Aloy seemed to smile at that last statement. "Suppose I do join the army, what then," I asked. "Then you'll serve the sun king for a number of years. If you prove yourself capable, you might even be rewarded for your efforts," Marad explained. I on't know why, but I suspected that there was something deeper going on, almost as if the famed spymaster was hiding something important. I dismissed it. Of course he was hiding something. He was most definitely hiding a lot of things.

After a brief discussion, Aloy left me with Blameless Marad and went off on her own. He showed me around the city, telling me what I needed to know about the important parts. When the day drew to an end, he showed me where I would be staying. He had payed for a room at the local inn (funny how some things survive the end of the world) where I would stay till morning. The room I stayed in felt much more comfortable than the Nora hut that I had been trapped in previously, despite being about two thirds the size. After giving the room a brief look over, I decided to get some rest. Tomorrow was going to be a busy day.

The dawn sun rose and I woke up with it. It was the first proper nights sleep I had since leaving cryo weeks ago. If all went well, I would be joining the Carja Military. In all honesty, I was a little on edge about it all. A line of thought began revving in my mind about Blameless Marads reasoning for allowing me to sign up. After all, i was still an unknown quantity in this world. Even with all his connections, with all the information he had access to, how could he judge me fairly? My answer would soon come as I heard a knock on the door. "Come in," I shouted. Marad came in, surprising me. I didn't expect him to come personally. Once again, my mind began racing through the reasons why he would do this. "I cannot stay for too long," he said, "Time is short. Get ready and come with me."

Twenty minutes was all it took for me to get ready and for us to walk silently to the office where people signed up. "This is where you will join the army. I have arranged for you to be trained by Captain Kalihn, a close friend of mine," Marad explained quietly, "Just hand this in to the recruiter and everything will be sorted." Blameless Marad handed me a piece of paper with glyphs on it before disappearing. Alarm bells were ringing. What did he have planned for me? It was all too easy. I headed on in and met with the recruiter. I handed him the paper and his eyes went wide. I didn't read it, but it was obviously very important. Clearly, he feared what it said. Everything about this made me want to run, though now I'm glad I didn't. Within days of entering Meridian, I was off to boot camp to become a soldier. To go and fight, though for what, and how, I was going through hell to find out.

Chapter 5: The Conflict Begins

Days into my training with the Carja and none of my questions had any answers. The last few weeks had been as confusing as it could get, and despite coming to my senses I was still trying to work it out. Not only was I trying to figure out why I was training as a Carja Soldier, but I got to thinking where all my former colleagues had went. Siri, the Williams brothers and even Kelsey had all woken up before me. Siri in particular bothered me. We were supposed to wake up together but didn't. Where did she go? Where did any of them go? A hope that they ended up somewhere safe escaped me, considering my encounter with the bandits, seemed rather hopeless. This world was so different to what we thought it would be. I had actually asked Captain Khalid, my training lead, about why I was here. But he would refuse to answer, having been ordered not to by Blameless Marad.

The Blameless Marad had me put together with four others after about two weeks of training. Surprisingly, Javid was the only Carja actually with us. He was a very reserved man, who spoke very little of his past. I noticed several scars that told a collection of stories as yet unheard of. The others were as remarkable, but in different ways. There were two brothers – Hovid and Lowin – who were Oseram Freebooters before being employed under the Carja. They were rather open about doing this for the pay (which they hinted at being considerable), but I suspected that they joined out of boredom. Lowin was an expert at taking apart machines and figuring out how they worked, and Hovid was a keen hunter. Man, animal or machine didn't seem to matter to him. The last one – Jeremiah – was an odd one. She was a mercenary from the south, was never spoke about whatever tribe she may of come from. Me and her were similar in that respect. Neither of us had a tribe to call our own and thus had none to call our own. Like the two brothers, she was employed by the Blameless Marad. It would seem he took a personal interest in all of us and saw fit to put us together, though none of us could guess as to why. Hovid and Lowin both joked about us going after a wide range of things, including the sun. No matter what, they could always make us laugh.

About a day after meeting my new “colleagues”, I decided to visit the market. The Blameless Marad was paying me what he called a training fee, so I was able to have a look around in whatever spare time I managed to get. Going around the markets helped ease me into this new world, and after a while it ceased to be a “new” world. Not home, just my life now. It was the day after I finished my training that I went to the market to celebrate. There was a person who sold books – something of a rarity, even in the city – and I decided that I would pick a few up. I was busy looking at which books I wanted to pick up when I felt a tapping on my shoulder and heard my name. I turned saw someone I thought I recognised. I faced an man in his early 50's but looked older. His hair was a dirty grey colour. But then I did recognise him! “Daniel! Is that you,” I almost screamed aloud. “Yeah, it's me,” he whispered back, “but please keep your head down. It isn't wise to bring attention around here.” I stopped for a moment. What did he mean it wasn't wise to bring attention around here? We were in Meridian. But Daniel, or who I assumed to be Daniel (jury was still out if I was hallucinating or not), and I went somewhere private.

We ended up in a small house near the edge of the Royal Fields, just outside the city. Part of me wondered why he had bought me so far out, but I put any doubt I had to one side. The room me and Daniel settled in was small and dark, save for the warm light of a fire that Daniel spent the past five minutes lighting. We both sat down on chairs facing one another.

There was a moment of silence before Daniel finally spoke up. "I'm glad to see you after all these years. You have no idea what it's like to find yourself suddenly in you didn't know was coming," he happily told me. "How are you even here? You died, hundreds of years ago," I questioned him. He looked at me and said, "If you're talking about that experiment I performed, then clearly I didn't die," he started to explain, "I was trying to create a wormhole that could allow me to travel through time. I didn't expect it to blow up on me." "What went wrong," I asked. "Well, the quantum tunnel was powered up, and just when we started to initialise the particle bombardment it blew up. There was a flash of blue light and I ended up waking up in the room. It took me a while before I realised what had happened. It worked, just not as intended," he said before laughing. I didn't know why, but something felt off about him. This WAS my friend Daniel, but somehow something had changed in him. Of course I knew he was working on some sort of time-related project before he "died" and he was the best quantum physicist around, but something just didn't sit too right with me. "What about you? I'm assuming that little pet project of yours worked?" "Of course. I don't suppose it matters now but yeah, it worked. I managed to get several cryo-pods built. Me and my team slept through time. But there was a problem. The pods failed and we all woke up at different times," I explained. Danny asked, "You wake up with anyone?" "No. I woke up last and alone, 80 years after everyone else. What about you? You come through with anyone." Daniel thought for a moment, oddly. "No. At least, I didn't know about it if they did."

Me and Daniel spoke for several hours before parting ways. The entire time, I couldn't help but think that he had an ulterior motive in speaking to me. Could I really call him friend anymore? He had been in this world for thirty years. And it seemed like he had been through a lot of damage in all that time. At times, I question who I was even speaking to. I thought about Blameless Marad and decided that I would ask him about Daniel next time we met.

The day came when we finally got some answers, though not the ones I actually wanted. The Blameless Marad gathered us three days after we first got together and told us about the Watchmaker, an individual that had been plaguing the Carja Nobility for several decades. In fact, the Watchmaker was responsible for several murders that had been plaguing Meridian for the last two weeks. Apparently it was a well kept secret. When I got the chance I asked about Daniel. Blameless Marad looked at me as if I had just committed treason and rushed me off to see the King of all things. Apparently, this was a much bigger deal than I thought it was. It was certainly big enough for an audience with the king. Blameless Marad dragged me past a long line of nobility that grumbled and complained. The king himself was standing at a balcony, looking sullen and serious. "Your luminescence, I have something that requires your attention," Blameless Marad said. King Avad turned around and said, "You better have news about the Watchmaker. I've got too many problems to not deal with that now." I could see how tired he was, as if he hadn't slept in a week. "Of course. This man I have with me claims to have spoken with the Watchmaker," Marad responded. Both me and King Avad lit up with two very different mixtures of shock. Mine was a mix of horror and surprise. "Wait, WHAT!" I shouted. This was not something I ever expected to hear. "We have identified the Watchmaker as someone who goes by the name Daniel Edwards. We need to know everything you do about him," Blameless Marad explained. It took a long while, but I told the pair everything I knew about Daniel, even the parts about us being from the old world. The king for his part just listened to what I had to say, however unbelievable it may have been. By the time I was finished, all I could do was answer the many questions Blameless Marad had for me. I left in a state of disbelief, like the whole world had been torn from beneath my feet. Suddenly, I wasn't as alone as I thought I was, on top of my best friend from my former life

being a serial killer. I went back to my accommodation as I continued to ask questions that would go unanswered.

I still had a lot of questions when the squad got together two days after my meeting with the Blameless Marad and the king. Hovid and Lowin were still messing about as usual, though I noticed that Jeremiah and Javid were closer. I didn't seek to pry, their business was their own. It was the day that we were to be deployed after the Watchmaker, my friend Daniel, with the intent to kill him. Evidently the king thought that Daniel was too dangerous to be left to live. He wasn't wrong. I simply didn't have the foresight to see how right they all were. The Blameless Marad had given us our first orders. We were to go south to investigate a camp said to be set up by Daniel – the Watchmaker – and then check out a nearby estate owned by a Carja Noble. Javid took the lead as he always did.

It took us a week to get down to the camp. Hovid and Lowin had both been complaining about hiking through the jungle, though they were only half joking. I was surprised that such an environment could exist this far north, but then geography was never my strongest suit. “Hey, boss. What are we going to do when we catch the Watchmaker,” Lowin asked. Javid didn't respond. He was too busy focusing on the track ahead of him. “Hey, Javid. You up there?” Javid finally heard Lowin, but simply motioned for the Oseram to quiet down. We stopped. Clearly he had noticed something ahead. Javid motioned us to remain silent and move forward, and we quickly figured out why. The encampment was just ahead and clearly someone was there. No one had to talk, everybody knew what they had to do. We spread out and slowly closed in while also keeping within sight of one another. But as I got closer, I began to recognise the lone figure at the encampment. It was Aloy! I looked around to make sure she was alone before standing up. Javid motioned me to get back down but I ignored him as I walked into the camp. “Aloy,” I shouted. She turned and without a beat said, “Finally. The Blameless Marad told me you would be here. Where's the rest of the team?” “Oh, messing about in the bushes. We thought you were someone else. Come on out. She isn't with the Watchmaker.” Slowly, Javid and the others made their way into the camp. Javid didn't seem too impressed. “Don't ever do that again,” he said to me, “It's odd seeing a Nora girl here. For a moment I thought you were with the watchmaker. Mind telling us why you're all the way out here?” “The Blameless Marad asked for me to help. He said I could help you track the Watchmaker so here I am,” she explained. “I don't understand what some Nora girl could do to help,” Jeremiah sighed, “What could you possibly do to help us?” Aloy didn't even have time to respond. “I've heard of her. Aloy hear is currently in the favour of the Sun King after a series of incidents several months ago. And if the Blameless Marad trusts you enough with helping us, then I'm glad you're here,” Javid explained. He clearly knew a lot more than I thought. “Okay so she's a big deal. But if she's here and we're here, where is the Watchmaker and his little army,” Jeremiah angrily asked. I sensed that she didn't like Aloy being here. Or maybe something else was bothering her. I really couldn't tell. “I've already had a look around and it looks as though they headed east. We can follow the tracks to find out where they went,” Aloy suggested, possibly sensing the same issues coming from Jeremiah as I did. “Okay then. Lead the way,” Javid asked of Aloy.

Aloy didn't protest, though she did mutter under her breath. She didn't like the undue attention she had just been given. Whatever tracks she followed led us to a homestead that had clearly seen better days. Smoke was rising from the various buildings. I was almost about to comment when I saw the bodies of several Carja soldiers near the main gate of the

property. I want to say that that was my first encounter with death, but I would be fooling myself. “This is where the tracks lead,” Aloy said. I don’t think any of us were paying attention as we walked into the courtyard and found the bodies of the owners hanging from a tree. The smell from the corpses made me throw up. But that wasn’t the worst part. I specifically was left a message. Daniel had, in blood, written the following:

“You think your new friends will help you. Time will die and you will be left a barren world my old friend.”

An hour later and everyone had set up camp a short distance away from the property. Hovid and Lowin were busy burying the bodies of the dead whilst Jeremiah and Aloy were busy figuring out what had happened and where the Watchmaker and his army went. I was sitting at the campfire across from Javid, thinking about what he had wrote to me. Why did he leave me that message? Was it to gloat? Or was it something more sinister? Perhaps a warning? I had so many different questions while also trying to comprehend that fact that my former friend was capable of murder. Javid just sat there glaring at me, as if I had something to do with what had happened. I was still trying to wrap my head around it all when he finally spoke up. “I know you’re involved,” he started to say, “But you would know more about that than I would. You need to start talking.” His intentions were pretty clear. “The Watchmaker. I used to know him. I called him friend back before our tribe was destroyed, but I thought he was dead until I met him back at Meridian.” I didn’t bother explaining that both of us were over a thousand years old. I felt like whatever I said needed to be believable. “What does the message mean? I can’t read the glyphs.” “The language is that of my tribe. English we call it. I don’t know about what it says. At the very least it was a message to me. But I have no idea what it means, like a bad riddle. But it might not mean anything, like a bad joke,” I explained. Javid looked as if he was decided my fate. “And you’re not involved in what happened here,” he asked. “I didn’t even know this place existed. I’ve never been here before,” I answered honestly. “You’re hiding something from me. Something you’re not telling me. But I guess it doesn’t matter now. Time will tell us who you really are,” came the ominous warning.

After the others came back from whatever they were doing, I explained my connection to the watchmaker. Aloy for her part was more curious than anything, but thankfully didn’t reveal the truth of my past. Hovid and Lowin kept questioning me about everything from my tribe to the Watchmaker, but I really couldn’t give them the answers they clearly wanted. But Jeremiah spoke out against me. Like Javid, she lost any trust she may have had. But she chose to actively discredit me, and called for me to be held responsible. She actually accused me of being a spy for the Watchmaker. Javid proceeded to rip into her, saying that the Blameless Marad would never put the spy on the team. After the short argument the two had, both Jeremiah and Aloy put out what they had found out. What was said wasn’t as important as what was found out. Daniel had gathered himself a small army. He had apparently led around 40-50 people to attack the people living here. After they were done, it appears some went north while others went south. Aloy noted that a Cauldron was south of the house. But Meridian lay north. It was decided that Aloy and myself would go down to the cauldron while Javid would take the others to follow the north-leading tracks. I think part of it was that Javid didn’t trust me. That makes sense looking back. But I think part of it was keeping Jeremiah away from me and Aloy. She didn’t like or trust either of us and there was a feeling that she may have taken matters into her own hands during the night. That thought worried me to no end. But it wouldn’t matter either way, as Javid had me and Aloy leave before it got

dark. He may not have trusted me, but he didn't have to. Like he said to me, he trusted that the Blameless Marad to know what he was doing.

As Aloy and I left the camp, I asked her, "This Cauldron; you have any idea what they would want with it?" "Well, they could override machines with it. But you're not interested in the cauldron now are you," she asked. I wondered if it was alright to open up with her. "I knew Daniel, before all of this. But the man who I met back in Meridian, who did all this. He looks like my friend, but doesn't act like him. I keep seeing these faces I recognise, but the people behind them are completely different. I'm more alone now than I ever was before," I let out. Aloy didn't ridicule me like so many others would. I guess, in some ways, she understood what it meant to be alone. To be isolated from everyone else. She didn't say anything in response. She didn't have to. The journey we were about to undertake would see us go beyond just Cauldrons and cities. And it would leave me scarred for life.

Chapter 6: Aloy and Co.

Protagonist's Journal Entries:

Day 89: It's been 89 days since I left that Cryo-pod. Funny, isn't it. My life is so radically different and I haven't had time to process it. I bought a blank book meant for writing and fashioned some pens for writing. Maybe, if I put thoughts down on paper I can come to terms with my new life. Aloy has been helpful. She's impatient, but she's a good listener. Just like her "mother". We're about to split from the others to go to this cauldron. Aloy says it should take a day tops.

Day 91: We found the cauldron and explored it. Aloy has been here before (which should've been obvious) and has noticed some.... changes. The whole place looks like its been torn apart. Wires everywhere. Parts stripped out and removed. Machines destroyed and stripped. The centre of the cauldron is no better. The reactor that powered the cauldron is gone. The central processing unit is also gone. It's odd. Daniel is a computer genius, sure. But why would he take any of this stuff? What does he need it for? Aloy has just as many questions as I do. It's frustrating.

Day 92: There's nothing more we can learn here. I am surprised to learn that Daniel himself was here. A message, in the form of an Audio Recording. We almost didn't find it. He rambles on about how this world was never meant to exist and how he's going to fix it. With what he knows, I'm concerned he'll find a way. We're returning to Meridian to inform the Blameless Marad of what we've found and meet up with the rest of the team. Maybe they found out something important.

Day 95: The Blameless Marad has sent the rest of the team to North, towards some Oseram settlement. Apparently he understands the reasons why we've split in two. He's sending me and Aloy to Nora land. By request of the Matriarchs apparently. I'm worried about the laws, though Aloy has assured that she'll vouch for me. Comforting.

Day 98: We'll be arriving at Mother's watch tomorrow. Matriarch Teersa should be there to greet us. When I look at Aloy, I see more than just a passing resemblance to Elizabeth. Of course, Aloy is a clone so the looks are more than just skin deep. But it's more than that. The compassion, the curiosity. That look in her eye when she talks about something she's passionate about. I can't help but admire Aloy. She's lived her whole life never knowing her mother but ironically has turned out like her in so many ways.

Day 100: The Nora don't want me here. The matriarchs have given me permission, but it's clear that many of the Nora faithful want me gone at least. One in particular, Resh, is a fanatical little bastard. I'll have to watch him while I'm here. As to the reason why we're here: Daniel came through here. Or at least his little army did. They kidnapped some of the Nora and took them north. Braves were sent after them but came back not long after empty handed. The list of questions I have keeps growing. I fear the Nora that have been taken are already dead. Aloy takes it like it doesn't bother her, but she can't hide her discomfort from me. She shares too many mannerisms.

Day 102: We're going to make a move today. Aloy is desperate to follow the ones responsible for taking her fellow tribe members. She claims it's to pay a debt. There's something deeper there. Regardless, I'll go wherever there are answers. So, for now, I'll follow her lead.

Day 103: Daniel didn't go north. He went south. Some Nora braves came up to us and said they saw a small band of warriors being led by an old man be lead south-east. The way I came from. There's nothing south for miles. Not sure if there's anything East, but.... I suspect Daniel is going south. There is only one place I know he could want to go. Elysium. That empty tomb. Aloy doesn't want to abandon the Nora who've been kidnapped. As much as I care about her and what she's trying to do, there are answers I need to get. I've got to go back. Last thing I want to do, but what choice do I have.

Day 112: Didn't realise how far away Elysium is. But I'm here, and I ain't alone. I've already spotted Daniel go in. Problem is that he's left a guard at the door. It's getting dark, so I'll have to wait till morning before I make some sort of move. It's going to be a long and cold night.

Day 114: I know what he is doing. Daniel accessed the old files. Specifically his own. He's going to build a time machine! I need to get back to Meridian before he can finish what he's doing.

Aloy needed to save those Nora. Rost would have told her that she would have a duty to do so. She had tracked the Naysayers and the kidnapped Nora to Devils Grief. Aloy was fed up with cults. Sneaking up on the camp, she was surprised by how few guards there were. Best of all, the Nora captives were still. The Nora Braves she spoke to said that there were three times as many as this. It would be a piece of cake. It wouldn't be any different to taking out bandit camps.

Half hour later, the captives were free and the cultists had been dealt with. One of the Nora came up to thank Aloy. "There's no need to thank me, I was just helping out. It's the matriarchs you've got to thank," Aloy responded. "Sorry if I'd rather thank you. The matriarchs shouldn't get praise for doing one thing right. Besides, they'll shun us the moment they found out they find out where we were held," the Nora male said cynically.

Returning to Matriarch Teersa, Aloy made a note to check up on her companions. Before she did that though, she wanted to make sure nothing else needed doing. "Teersa, is there anything else I can do?" "Don't worry child. The rest we can handle. Wounds can be healed, homes can be rebuilt. But you have my gratitude for rescuing those braves," Teersa said, "By the way. A Carja came for you. Asked for you to come to Meridian. Something about an important meeting about those responsible for the recent raid." Aloy gave a slight nod. "I expected nothing less. My companion went south. If you see him, can you point him towards Meridian?" "Of course child. Now be on your way. There's a lot of work that needs doing." And with that, Aloy was back on her way to Meridian, hoping that Erend wasn't too drunk this time.

Chapter 7: Chess Pieces

It took me a little over three weeks to get back to Meridian. I had to tell Blameless Marad of what I had learnt and do what I could to stop Daniel from what I thought he was doing. I was surprised to get there and see Lowin and Hovid already talking to the Blameless Marad. None of them seemed too happy. The Blameless Marad spotted me and called me over. "It's good that you're here. There have been, some developments while you've been gone," he told me. "So you're aware of me and Aloy splitting from the others?" "Of course. But that's not important right now. Javid and Jeremiah are dead and we know here the Watchmaker and his army are. We need to act fast before he disappears again." The urgency in his voice was not lost. "Where is he? Give me an exact location!" I demanded. "What. He's at the top of the Bitter climb. From what I understand his army has been there for the past week." "What's at the top? Are there ancient ruins?" I panicked. I didn't realise that Aloy had been listening in on the entire thing. "Yes. There are ruins up there, or at least, what's left of them," she explained, "Gaia Prime it's called." The others didn't recognise the meaning behind that name. How could they. "I know what Daniel – the Watchmaker – is up to. We need to get to him as soon as possible!" "Oh come on. There's an entire army at this Gaia Prime, and you want us to chase after a guy we haven't seen in weeks! How are we supposed to find them," Lowin angrily shouted at me. "The army isn't important. If Daniel has his way, they'll never exist. None of you will." I must have sounded like a raving lunatic. "What are you talking about? Speak sense," Hovid asked. "Daniel. He has an obsession with the past, with the old world. More than that, he has an obsession with time. And with ending it. He's making a device to make that possible," I explained. "How? It doesn't seem possible," Hovid said. "Daniel is a genius. He knows things about machines that no man should know. He can do it, even if we don't know how." Only Aloy seemed convinced. I was certain that she saw her fair share of impossible things. "He can build a device that allows him to travel through time, but it will take time for him to do that. He has just come back up from the south. We still have time to stop him if we can." "How do we know that you speak the truth. Surely such a device is impossible," the Blameless Marad asked. "It would be. But Daniel has found a way. But like I said, it will take time. Gaia Prime is the spot he'll build it in," I explained. "Alright. If what you say is true, then we need to make preparations for an assault. I'll let you all know when we can make a move," Blameless Marad told us before leaving towards the Palace. Hovid and Lowin soon followed without saying another word, leaving me and Aloy alone. We looked at each other. She was the only one who I felt could even attempt to understand the dangers that we faced. But for all the understanding she could offer me, I knew that even she might not fully realise what was about to happen.

Soon after I returned to Meridian, I found out what had happened to Javid and the others after me and Aloy left. They spent three days tracking the other war band of cultists before losing the trail entirely. They found themselves being sent north after returning to Meridian to find out what was going on at Sunfall. Turned out, Daniel had "evicted" out the remnants of the Shadow Carja and moved in his cult. But it was a graveyard by the time Javid and the others arrived, and they ended up on a wild goose chase until being ambushed at the start of Bitter Climb. Javid was killed almost immediately and Jeremiah was severely wounded. She ended up dying from her wounds.

Hours after telling the Blameless Marad and the other of what I had learnt and I had an idea of what needed to be done. The inn that had previously sheltered me now offered me little comfort. Daniel needed to die. I knew that there would be an attempt to capture him, but it

would fail. Daniel was going to try and get back to Gaia Prime back when it was still active. He was going to end this world before it even existed. He never intended on coming back. Aloy was still with me but had fallen asleep on the bed. She had not slept in days, so I allowed her to get some rest on the bed. I couldn't sleep at all. I'd much rather put my mind to other things. I looked over to Aloy. A familiar face, but there was a different sort of beauty hiding beneath it. We hadn't spent much time together, but I already knew she was someone I could depend on. If there was ever a chance we could get out of this okay, I'd hope she would feel the same.

If I was going against Daniel, then I would need the right weapons. Spears wouldn't cut it. Too big and too unwieldy. I needed a sword. And a hidden blade. I would have to get them made, but I was assured that it wouldn't be a problem when I bought some designs to the Blameless Marad. I admit that he had a knack for getting things done. Especially after he delivered just days later. The hidden blade was designed specifically to look like a leather brace held together by a large metal strap. It would have been useless if it was obvious. He rather unexpectedly gave me three hidden blades just in case I wanted to make any modifications. This was on top of the modifications that he himself had done to the blades just to get them to work as intended. The sword itself was based on the old Katanas used by the Japanese many centuries prior and was just as amazingly crafted. Light and strong, it wasn't much use against armour. But it would do me good against Daniel. He wasn't much of a fighter. I spent a lot of time practising with both the sword and the hidden blades until they were comfortable to use. The Blameless Marad kindly let me practice with some dummies.

It took two days before a plan was presented to the king. It was a big gamble. About 100 Carja soldiers would lay siege to the opposing cultists. The point wasn't to defeat them, they would outnumber the Carja three to one. But it would let me and the others to sneak in and deal with Daniel. We would be getting help. The Vanguard of the Sun King would lead the charge. Perhaps it would be enough. I certainly hoped so. But time was of the essence, meaning we had to leave almost immediately. By noon of that day, we were on our way, trying to blend in as much as possible into the Carja force.

A week later and we were at Bitter Climb. It was clear that the cultists were there to stay. Daniel was very busy. We had set up camp far enough away that they wouldn't bother us, but close enough to keep an eye on them. Aloy came up to me and started talking. "Do you think that he's finished it yet," she asked. "I hope not. But honestly, I don't know. If he's been here for as long as I think he has, then he most likely will have already completed part of it." Aloy frowned at this. "If he has already finished it, how long do you think we'll have." "None. We simply won't exist. Well, you won't. If I'm right about the time, then I will already be in cryo when he makes his move." This didn't seem to help. Honestly, I was as confused as Aloy was. I didn't really understand it myself. Not that I needed to. "Erend says that he'll be marching on the camp tomorrow. It'll be our chance to sneak in at least," Aloy said optimistically. "I know. I... just hope we get to Daniel before he gets away," I told her. She didn't say anything. Not much she could, given the circumstance.

The night before the battle, I found myself unable to sleep. That wasn't an issue of itself, I hadn't been able to sleep properly since I woke up from cryo. But that night was different. In 24 hours, several hundred would be dead or injured, and I would be forced to kill a man I

used to call friend. I went into cryo hoping to wake up into a paradise, but I had yet to see it. That night ended up being the last chance I would get to sleep.

Chapter 8: Back to the Start

The battle between armies raged on as I did my best to focus on the task ahead. I was once again alongside Aloy as we attempted to enter the old facility. It had been extensively damaged, that was evident. But I was certain that the control room was intact. Hovid and Lowin were somewhere on the other side of all the fighting. We had split up to further help us get inside without being detected. After several close calls, both me and Aloy managed to get to the top of Bitter Climb to find the two Oseram waiting for us. Evidently, they were quicker than us. “So we’re here. What now,” Lowin asked. “We get to the control room. It’s the only place the Watchmaker could be,” I explained. “How would you know that,” Hovid asked, not even hiding his suspicion. “I overheard him talking about it when I tracked him south,” I lied. I didn’t have time to explain to him that I had been here before, a long, long time ago. “Okay, so we get there. Let’s move,” Hovid commanded. The climb up to Bitter Climb was tough, but moving through this shattered ruin was overwhelmingly heartbreaking. I worked here. I knew the Alphas who died here. Gaia. To have this be her eventual fate was horrifying in its own way.

It didn’t take us long to fight through the small number of guards that Daniel had put in our way. Nor did it take us long to get to the door between us and the control room. Between us and Daniel. “This is it. He’s behind this door,” I said, wishfully hoping that this was all a bad dream. “How can you be sure,” Aloy asked. “I don’t. Regardless, we’ll find out in a moment,” I answered honestly. “How do we get in,” Hovid asked sternly. “The door should open by itself. But he must of broken the mechanism. We need to pull it open,” I told him. “We can do that. Lowin, get the other side.” Hovid and Lowin both grabbed a side of the door and pulled. The door opened slowly, revealing the harsh truth I had been hoping to avoid. I didn’t see Daniel walk through, all I saw was the tear in time he created close in front of me. “Quickly, we need to get in! He’s gone through,” I shouted. The two Oseram moved quicker, opening the door just enough to allow us to get in. But it was too late. “What just happened? Where is he,” Hovid demanded to know. “The machine, it’s been completed. The Watchmaker has gone through. If we act quickly, we can stop him.” I rushed over to the control panel. It was a collection of simple buttons and levers, a long way from the holographic interfaces I was used to. I noticed that some of the controls were to set the date. And that’s when I noticed when it was set. The day the Gammas and Betas evacuated to Elysium! Of course! He would go unnoticed by the rushed engineers and scientists. All I needed was a way to turn the machine back on. “What are you doing! Stop messing with that,” Hovid angered. “We need to follow him. This is how we do it,” I responded. There was a red button. I pressed it and the tear in time reappeared in front of us. “We need to act now. I don’t know how long it will last,” I urged. “We’re going through that!” Lowin had lost his composure. I had to act fast and take charge. “No, me and Aloy will go. After the tear closes, get some new power cells and hook it up to the controls. I’ve already set them up, just press the red button. That will allow us to come back,” I explained quickly. “If that’s your plan, then do it. But you bring him back, dead or alive,” Hovid ordered. I didn’t give Aloy the chance to protest her role in all this as I dragged her through the tear in time.

I felt nothing as I travelled back through time. There was nothing to see, and I felt a massive weight on me that seemed to crush me. Then I reappeared on the floor of the control room as suddenly as I had left, as if time had no effect on the journey. Minutes passed as I struggled to get all my senses back. My head ached with pain, my vision blurred. I couldn't even scream as my voice refused to leave my throat. But it quickly faded as I focused on Aloy. I struggled over to her, partly out of fear that we would be found before we could go after Daniel. But partly because I needed to make sure she was okay. I needed her.

"Where are we," Aloy managed to groan. "The control room. The more pressing question is when are we," I told her. I walked over to the holographic interface on the control panel and double checked the date. We had arrived three days before the evacuation to Elysium. If we were lucky, then we would be able to catch Daniel before he could do anything. "We need to move. I could explain my presence away, but you not so much," I told her while helping her up. "But where," she asked. "I had a room in the sleeping area. If we can get there, then we'll be okay for a moment." Aloy, tough as she was, seemed to have come out of the time travel worse than myself. I was surprised by the lack of anyone travelling the halls of Gaia Prime, though I figured that they would all be working hard to finish whatever projects they had. It didn't take us long to get to my private quarters undetected. I sat Aloy down on the bed and closed the door, making sure to lock it behind me. "So this is what Gaia Prime used to look like," she stated to no one in particular. "Yes, but don't get attached. If all goes well, we'll be able to get back home soon enough. Rest here. I'll need to find out if Daniel is here or not," I started to explain. "What do you mean, if he's here or not," Aloy puzzled. "I looked at the control panel. He's not due here for another three days. I bought us three days before his arrival so we could stop him when he gets here," I explained to her. "So he's not here then," she said, disappointed. I walked over to the wardrobe. Empty. I needed to blend in. "I'm going to find some clothes so we can blend in. Hopefully, Dr Sobeck won't mind if you borrow her clothes for a short time." I hesitated with the mention of her name. Both of us had a complicated relationship with Elisabet Sobeck. "Whatever you do, don't leave this room. And don't use your focus. Your presence will difficult to explain as it is without the information it has being learnt by everyone else." I left before she could argue with me.

I was more than happy to relieve a lab technician of his spare clothes. I made a mental note to pick up a replacement focus for myself and Aloy while we were here. But there was something more important I had to do. I casually walked over to Dr Sobeck's room and knocked to make sure she wasn't in. I got no reply, so I opened the door. I knew that the door would be locked if she was inside, so this was a very good sign. I made sure to close the door behind me and went over to the terminal. I didn't access the files, instead opening a communication channel to the one person I could count on. "Gaia, you there," I asked. "Hello, this is rather unexpected. You are supposed to be in Elysium Doctor. I have no record of your arrival," Gaia questioned. "Yeah, the records should tell you that, and they ain't lying. It's hard to explain, but I am both there and here," I explained. Gaia reflected this for a moment before responding. "This is an odd situation. Please clarify." "I don't have time Gaia, but I need your help. Can you do a DNA scan and see if Daniel Edwards is in the facility," I asked of her. "That is a peculiar request. My files indicate that Daniel Edwards is deceased." "I know Gaia, please trust me on this." I waited for a moment, unsure if Gaia was going to follow my request. "I have performed a base wide DNA scan and double checked with surveillance. I can find no evidence that Daniel Edwards has been in the facility since his death. I have, however, detected two separate instances of Dr Sobeck." I waited for a moment lost in thought. "If I may, doctor. Perhaps Dr Sobeck may be of further help," Gaia

suggested. “No. Under no circumstances is she or any of the other Alphas be made aware of my existence,” I told the AI, “I’m in a situation that needs to be handled quietly.” “I am not comfortable in keeping secrets from them. But I will honour your request as long as it does not put the safety of this facility or my colleagues at risk,” she scorned. I wasn’t expecting her to be so human. “Thank you.”

I returned to my quarters to find Aloy asleep on the bed. The travel through time must have done a real number on her. I suddenly found myself in a moment of silence, able to finally think about everything I had been through. Ironically, I now had the time to think despite it running short. I went to the basin and looked into a mirror for the first time in God knows how long. I had grown a full beard and my once short hair was now a long mess. I was no longer the boy who grew beyond this old world. I briefly considered shaving it all off, but figured it would be better if I cleaned myself up. There was a cheap shaving kit on the basin. Instead of shaving my beard off, I tidied it up. I brushed my hair and made sure I looked like I belonged. From a distance, no one would be able to tell who I really was. I knew that if Dr Sobeck or any of the other Alphas were to notice me, then I would be recognised with a closer expectation. But it would have to do. I checked the time on the terminal. Lunchtime. I decided to risk being caught to try and get some food for me and Aloy. We’d both be here for a while.

Chapter 9: Killing of a Friend

I sat in the dark, contemplating the journey that led me to here, now. How did Daniel become such a monster? I guess it didn't matter in the long term. He would arrive in just a few hours, though I wasn't sure when exactly. He had to die.... But could I really do it. I knew I had to. Even if I took him back alive, then what was stopping him from coming back? Only his death could secure the future.

“Aloy, it's time to go,” I said as I shook her awake, “It's time to make a move.” Aloy got out of bed, clearly still tired. “Get dressed. We'll head to the security room before making a move.” “Security room? Why are we going there,” Aloy asked. “Because we need access to the surveillance footage so we can track Daniel,” I told her. She seemed to accept that. “What are we going to do after that,” Aloy asked. “We kill him. Quietly. We wait for him to get somewhere private, somewhere where we won't be found then hide his body. When Hovid and Lowin re-open the portal, we will drag his body through.” Aloy looked at me in disbelief. “What makes you think that we can get back without a machine like that,” she asked me. “Daniel is incredibly proud. He'll want to see the results of his work before he dies,” I told her. Aloy seemed to accept this, but I could tell that she was simply uninterested. Her mind was elsewhere. “You're thinking about your mother?” Aloy nodded. “I've never been so close, yet so far. I understand why we can't talk to her, no matter how much I want to,” Aloy spoke sadly. This meant a lot to her, and it made me question my reasoning in bringing her. “It's time. Let's go.”

The halls were as busy as they could get, though no one seemed to notice that Aloy looked suspiciously like a younger version of Dr Sobeck. This would be the last chance to get to Elysium. We entered the security room as soon as we got there, making sure that no one decided to be too curious about our intentions. “Gaia, you there,” I asked. “I am here, doctor.” “Perform a DNA scan. Is Daniel Edwards here,” I requested. “Scans indicate that Daniel Edwards is present within the facility. He is currently posing as an an engineer,” Gaia informed us. “Damn, I was hoping to catch him in the control room. What's he doing right now?” “Inspecting the computer systems. It appears that he is blending in. Wait, he is accessing files. He has somehow opened files pertaining to the master override.” Damn. “Can he directly access the override,” I asked. “No, only the Alphas have access to the master override,” Gaia said. She sounded worried. “Don't worry Gaia, he won't get near any of them,” I promised. “Where is he now, exactly?” “Wait, he is now accessing my....” Gaia just stopped mid-sentence. Attempts to get back in touch with her were met with continued silence. I checked the terminal and it showed that Gaia was still operational, just unable to speak. “Where's Gaia!? Did he destroy her,” Aloy started to panic. “No. He can't do that without the master override. But he has removed her ability to speak. Without her, we'll find it difficult to track him. Start searching for him through the feeds,” I told Aloy, “Use your focus to get in touch with me if he moves.” Aloy started to scan the cameras before finding him, but I already knew where he was. The control room. After moving through the crowds, I managed to get back to the control room. I activated my left Hidden Blade right before entering the room. I felt a blunt blow to the back of my head and I blacked out.

I awoke some time later with an all too familiar face watching over me. Samina Ebadji had found me. “Samina....,” I tried to speak out. “Don't talk. Gaia, what's his condition....” I didn't hear the rest over the nausea. When I managed to come out of it, I noticed that both Dr

Sobeck and Patrick Brochard-Klein were in the control room with me. “What happened,” I asked, still nursing my wounded head. “I was hoping you could tell me. We found you laying unconscious on the ground...” “WAIT! Gaia, where is Daniel,” I shouted. “Currently in the reactor room with Dr Sobeck,” the AI answered. I got up and ran out of the room.

The reactor room was large and lit only by the light given off the cold fusion reactor itself. But I saw enough. Daniel had both Aloy and Dr Sobeck tied to a hand rail while he tried accessing the computers. It seemed Gaia had locked him out. “Tell the AI to let me into the systems,” I heard him say. “No,” came the defiant response. I stepped into view and called to him. “So, the prodigal son has come to see the world end again,” came the venomous words. “No, I’ve come to kill you,” I told him before pouncing. I almost caught him with my left blade before I realised that it was missing. Daniel kicked me in my stomach before elbowing me to the ground. He then gave me another good kick for measure. “I knew you would come after me. That’s why the huntress is here,” Daniel taunted, “You won’t risk her life. You’re too weak for that.” He turned his back on me to face the two women, reflections of each other. “I’m sure you are aware Dr Sobeck, but let me make this clear. You and your daughter will die today. But not before I get that master override.” Aloy spat at him. “You won’t get away with this,” Dr Sobeck said, sharing her daughter’s sentiment. “Oh but I will. One way or another,” he promised. He pulled a knife out of his pocket and pinned me against the wall. He was much stronger than I thought possible. “I saw you. When you first left that cursed grave Elysium. I thought about killing you, there and then. But I waited. What a pathetic mess you were. I wanted you to die on that plane. I wanted you to bleed out. But that bitch of a huntress saved you. So I guess I’ll have to watch you die now.” The anger I felt was more than any man should have. But I didn’t have a chance to react before he plunged the knife deep in the side of me. There was a sharp pain, followed by the dull dripping of my own blood. He let me go and I fell back to the floor in shock. “If you continue to fight, and Dr Sobeck remains stubborn, then I should make an example of the pair of you. I will make you watch her die, slowly.” He half strutted, half danced his way over to Aloy, almost as if his very walk was insane. I watched him plunge his knife in the Aloy’s side before punching her. He then proceeded to beat her before dropping her in front of me. She was still alive, but her breathing started to slow. I tried to move to her, but then I remembered. I still had my right blade! He walked over to Dr Sobeck. “Now, do as I say little girl before I make you suffer,” he angrily demanded of her. I managed to get to my two feet, blood still spilling from my side, and in a rush of adrenaline and using all the rage I could muster charged at the Watchmaker with the hidden blade. I had him on the floor and I stabbed him again and again. The last thing I remember was blacking out once again over the sounds of a woman screaming.....

I woke up a day later. All the Alphas were here, save for Dr Sobeck. I was in Medical. I looked around and saw that Aloy was already awake. She was badly beaten, and would leave with a few more scars, but she was tough enough to walk it off. “What’s going on? Where’s Dr Sobeck,” I asked. “She is... pre-occupied with other matters. She is in a meeting with General Herres,” Margo explained. “Aloy, you alright,” I shouted over. “I’m fine. Annoyed by the attention, but otherwise fine,” she said in her normal sarcastic way. I smiled. Even a beating couldn’t drive that from her. “I wondered why everyone was here,” I quipped. “Well, it’s not everyday that I get to see a younger version of Liz,” Travis said in his deep Texan accent. “Keep her out your head, Travis. She may look like a kitten, but there’s a tiger inside her,” I told him. “I have a what inside me?” Aloy looked over to me confused. “I’ll tell you later. What time is it?” Margo looked at her watch. “It’s coming up to one pm, why?” “It

won't be too long. Aloy, you able to walk out of here," I asked. "You know I am," she shouted back. I smiled and laid back down. In a few hours, we would be on our way back home.

No longer able to simply lay still, I decided to pay Dr Sobeck one last visit before I left. I soon found her in her office, most likely working on Gaia. "Hey Auntie Liz. Got a moment?" She looked at me and I could see the tiredness in her eyes. "Sure. Just give me minute," she said. She seemed upset, lost in thought. "Something bothering you," I asked. "That girl you're with. She's me isn't she. My clone,." she stated rather than asked. "It's a long story, but yes. She's your clone, though I'd much rather think of her as your daughter," I answered. Dr Sobeck looked at me as if to glare through me, but she couldn't manage it without smiling faintly. "I haven't spoken to her yet. I guess I'm afraid to," she said honestly. "You should. She's waited her entire life to meet you," I told her, "If all goes well, we'll both be out of here in an hour or two. I'd make that time count if I were you." I don't know why I encouraged her to speak to Aloy, but I figure that it was best for both of them.

I stared at the body of a man I once called friend, but ended up having to kill. I didn't know how to deal with the sudden rush of emotions that came with remembering. The rage, the sadness, the constant question and the remembering of much happier times. It all flooded my mind like an overflowing river of emotional damage. Even to this day I can remember everything that I thought of and all the emotions I could feel. And it would all haunt me for the rest of my life. Standing in the control room with the tear in time in front of me and Aloy, I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of come rush over me. What was done couldn't be changed, and it didn't matter if I accepted that or not. I turned to the Alphas and couldn't find the words to say goodbye. But I said it anyway. Without a tear or thought, I carried the body of the Watchmaker through the tear in time.

Returning to the future I now belonged to, I was met with an intense pain like I felt the last time I went through time. But I actually ended up recovering quicker for what it was worth. Hovid, Lowin, Captain Erend and the Blameless Marad were all there to greet me and Aloy. "This is a surprise. Captain, Marad, I wasn't expecting either of you," I blurted out without thinking. "Well of course, we didn't want to miss this," Erend said. "That him," Erend asked whilst kicking the body. "Yeah, that's him." I looked over to Aloy, who had fallen unconscious. "Aloy needs medical treatment. She's hurt real bad," I told them. "We'll see what we can do. We are in her debt after all, as we are with you," the Blameless Marad asked. "I didn't do anything," I muttered. "On the contrary, the Watchmaker was the final obstacle in bringing peace to the region. Many will sleep soundly knowing he is gone fore good," came the spymasters explanation. I didn't care, though. I laid on my back and spent a good long time just catching my breath, trying to reclaim the peace I had just lost for good. This journey was over, but my life had just begun....