Stories

A collection of narrative pieces, short and long, to fill in some of the gaps and flavor of the world.

- 1: Maret
- The Beast

1: Maret

Gunfire cracked in the distance and bullets thudded in to the ground, spraying dirt into the air. Men and women screamed as artillery shells screamed down through the air.

Constance knelt in the mud outside her tent behind a table that had been overturned to provide cover. The wet earth soaked into her pants; that was going to take forever to get out. Beside her, back against the table, Leon was bandaging his left arm. Constance peered over the edge of the table, watching the muzzle flash in the treeline while her crew took cover all around her, occasionally taking pot shots into the trees.

"This is no happenstance patrol."
"Yes my lady," Leon grimaced, "It is likely they were expecting us."
"When the fighting is over, I want a thorough search of the crew. I expect someone on the gallows by nightfall."
"Yes my lady."

Constance stood. The sun was only just starting to rise, shifting the twilight haze to deep reds. The tents around her were already being torn to shreds by the gunfire, and a few of them were burning. Not far away she heard the sound of an automatic emplaced gun begin its methodical *thump thump thump*. She shook her head and turned her back to the gunfire, walking around her tent to the large open space beyond.

As her Mechanical Walker, a Mesa, came into view she felt the surge of emotions from the machine. The spirt of the Mesa was calling for blood. The Walker's four heavy legs were pulled up against its body like a dead spider, the massive rotary canon was drooping down, barrel nearly touching the mud. As she approached, the front of the Walker opened like a gigantic mouth. She put a hand on the side of the machine and paused a moment. As bullets whipped past her, pinging uselessly off the Walker's armour, she breathed deeply and felt the Walker shiver.

Above her an artillery shell screamed downwards, intent on turning her into a red mist. She leapt into the open Walker and it closed behind her like a warm hug. The shell hit just outside and threw her into the seat as mud an shrapnel peppered the metal around her. She grinned as she righted herself in the seat, feeling the machine come to life as the two of them became one. The rotary cannon spun to life and the massive Walker stood to its full height. The gunfire in the treeline stopped and she watched as small shapes began sprinting away through the trees. It wouldn't matter.

She pulled the trigger and removed the treeline.

She saw bodies fly through the air, limbs pinned beneath logs and people impaled by splintered wood.

She pulled the trigger again and buried the hillside.

Her left arm itched and she looked over to see Leon climbing up the leg of the Walker. He pulled himself close to the window and shouted at her,
"Shall I tell the crew to give chase?"
"No," she shook her head, "Let them scurry back to their masters. Laguerre will know fear."

The Beast

The wind had just shifted and was now blowing from behind Elise into the valley. She was crouching in a tree, about ten feet off the ground, looking out at a clearing. Her dad had built the hide years ago, along with a dozen others in the valley. Just enough room to sit down if you wanted, and a little bit of cover from the weather if you pressed your back against the tree trunk. The field in front of her was filled with tall grasses and wildflowers that waved gently at her. She sighed deeply. If there were any deer out there, they wouldn't come anywhere near her now. She sat down and lay her rifle across her knees. It was her mother's rifle, from her time serving the Families. A simple bolt action, it was one of the cheapest the Families manufactured. Little more than a tube and a piece of Vein laid into a wooden stock. But it was reliable, and perfect for hunting. Elise had even recently saved up a little money and bought a scope for it.

She pulled open the bolt and removed the bullet from the chamber. One of her dad's homemade rounds, it was little more than a chunk of tapered iron, but it reacted with the Vein shard just as well as anything else, and it was cheaper than a trip to town to pick up professionally made ammo.

As she was inspecting the bullet, she saw movement on the other side of the clearing. A deer was cautiously stepping through the trees. It was a buck, and a massive one at that, with an impressive rack of antlers spreading out from its head like the branches of the trees around it. She watched as the buck sniffed the air, looking left and right, and she waited for the inevitable moment it smelled her and bolted. But that moment never came. Instead the buck, seemingly satisfied that there was no danger, strolled into the grass and began eating. Elise carefully got back into a crouch and put the bullet back in to the chamber. The animal must have lost its sense of smell. She double checked the wind but it was still blowing from behind her into the clearing. She wasn't going to let this stroke of dumb luck go to waste thinking about it any longer. She pushed the bolt back into place as quietly as she could and settled the rifle against her shoulder. She waited to a moment to make sure she had her breathing under control then placed the crosshair of the scope just below the animal's shoulder. The deer remained unaware as it continued to pull up mouthfuls of grass and flowers.

The gunshot echoed across the clearing and a group of birds took flight from a nearby tree. The buck raised its head, still chewing, to look in her direction. The shot had been lined up correctly, but she hadn't seen the impact. Frantically she pulled the bolt back, and inserted another bullet. Any other deer would have been gone by now but this one seemed dimwitted enough she might get another shot off. As she closed the bolt, she shook her head and tried to slow her heart rate. She must have sighted the scope incorrectly, probably missed the animal by inches. She placed the crosshair on the deer's shoulder again and then lowered the angle, judging her miscalculation as best she could, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit the dirt behind the deer, spitting a little shower of earth into the air, right where her crosshair was placed underneath its belly. Confused, she just stared at the animal, and it stared back at her. It swallowed the grass it was chewing then, as if suddenly realizing the predicament it

was in, bounded off into the trees and was out of sight in seconds.

1.

The walk home was long, and it felt longer since she hadn't been able to bring anything back with her. She lived with her mother and father on the edge of the village of Birch. It was a small house, one floor with a root cellar, a bedroom for her, a bedroom for her parents, and a small kitchen/living room. Her dad had a shed he used for his work fixing tools for the village, and she could see him in there now. The sun had gone down an hour ago but the shed was still glowing from the Vein lanterns he had hung up on the walls inside and out. He'd never splurged to actually get the house fitted with Vein, so most of their household items were still wood burning. Her dad preferred living the old way as much as possible, but he recognized that having open flames in his workshop was only a recipe for disaster. But other than the lanterns and her mom's rifle, she had grown up around candles and campfires.

She knocked quietly on the shed's door and gently pushed it open. Eric von Carr de Lagurre was a massive man, with broad shoulders and a gut that hung over his pants regardless of how well they were fitted. He nearly filled up the entirety of the small shed, and Elise always thought it was funny to see him attempting to turn around without knocking things over. Currently he was sitting on a stool, leaning over his desk and squinting at his current project: a hammer. The hammer's previous handle was lying in pieces on the floor and her dad was inspecting the new one. Without looking up he reached towards her with one arm and placed a finger on her lips.

"Concentrating," He whispered.

He removed his finger and gently took the hammer's handle in one hand, and the rest of the hammer in the other. Elise rolled her eyes, but waited patiently. Smoothly and gracefully, her dad brought the two pieces together, slotting the metal into the handle and then carefully placed it back on the table. He sat back and let out a deep sight before pretending to wipe sweat from his brow.

"Close one dad."
"Well, that's why they put me on the job," he pulled at his suspenders like he was showing off,
"How was the trip?"
"It was shit. I hit three hides and didn't see anything until this morning."
"But?"
"But nothing."

He shook his head and picked up the hammer, testing it's weight before gently tossing it onto a shelf labelled WIP.

"Sometimes, that's the way it goes kid. Don't feel too bad, we've still got a few months before winter and we've got plenty saved up."
"It still feels bad."
"Yeah, but you know what feels good? Bread. Go get something to eat. I'll be in in a minute."

Elise nodded and turned to leave, but paused in the door.
"What's wrong kid?"
"I saw something weird this morning."
"What was it?"
"A deer," she turned around to face her dad, "It walked into the clearing even though I was upwind."
"Deer are stupid," he chuckled, "Some are more stupid than others."
"Yeah I guess, but that's not the most weird part."

She explained what happened as her dad rubbed his chin.

"Well...yeah that's a little weird. But I've seen some animals walk off worse injuries. I remember once seeing this doe that had been mauled by a bear. I swear to the Sovereign this thing was missing one side of it's body. But it was still walking around like it wasn't even injured."
"If I did hit it, I at least got a lung shot."
"Well there you go," he turned back to his desk and began packing up, "I betcha that animal lay down and died a few hours ago."
"Alright well," Elise scratched her head, "Maybe tomorrow I'll go ask Colin to take me back out there in his little flying machine and see if I can find it."

Her dad froze. He slowly reached over to the wall and turned off a lantern, then slowly turned to face Elise. With the lantern off, deep shadows were cast across his face.

"Colin huh?" he grunted, "Goin' into the wilderness alone. With a boy? Maybe I should go have a talk with him first."

He grabbed the newly fixed hammer and slapped it into his hand, which caused the metal to fall out of the wooden handle and land directly on his toe. He shrieked and stumbled backwards into a shelf as Elise burst into laughter.

The two of them cleaned up the mess and in no time they were sitting on the couch. Her dad was snoring within seconds of sitting down. Elise quickly ate, then ushered her dad off the couch and into bed. Her mother rolled over and grabbed her hand as she passed.

"How'd it go?" she whispered.
"Lost a deer, but I'm going to see if Colin can help me find it tomorrow."

Her mother patted her hand and rolled back over. Elise quietly stepped out of the room and closed the door before making her way to her own bed.

2.

She woke up the next morning to the sounds of her dad in the kitchen. He was singing, badly, an old tune her mother had taught him from her military days. Elise pulled on a house coat and stepped out into the living room. Her dad was frying eggs in a pan on the wood stove. A pile of bacon was already cooked and sitting on a plate on the table. Her mom was already at the table, sitting in her wheelchair, reading a book while eating from the bacon plate. Eloie von Carr de

Lagurre was a military woman through and through. She always kept her back straight, and her mind sharp. She did everything with precision and refused to let herself get soft. She'd been wounded a few years ago in a skirmish with Maret forces near the border and had been unable to walk ever since.

Elise grabbed a handful of bacon, too late realizing how fresh it was, and yelped, dropping it all right back on the plate.

"Careful, that's hot," her mother smiled from behind the book.
"Oh really? Thanks for the heads up mom."
"Anything for my baby," she took a sip from a coffee cup, "In a hurry to see the deRoi boy?"
"Yes mother," she feigned a breathy voice and pressed the back of her hand to her forehead, "Every second awake without him is a thorn in my heart."
"Yes well, boys will do that. Make sure you adjust your sights this time. Your father told me what happened."
"He thinks I hit it."
"Yes well," she sniffed and took another sip of coffee, "One of us has actually used that rifle before. You missed dear. And that's okay, just don't miss next time."
"Truly, you are a font of wisdom."

Her mom nodded, and took another piece of bacon. Her dad brought over a basket filled with fruits, bags of nuts, half a loaf of bread and some jam, and set it on the table.

"I prepped this for you and Colin. Make sure the boy eats something. A blacksmith's son shouldn't be that thin, it's unnatural."
"He's an artist dad. He doesn't really work in the shop anymore."
"Still."

Elise laughed and took the basket.

"I'll be back in a couple days. If I don't find it by then, it's gone for good."
"That's quite reasonable," her mother said, "Use protection."
"Mom!"
"The gun!" she chuckled, "Obviously I meant the gun. By the Sovereign, what dirty thoughts you have!"

Elise hurried down the street with the rifle over her shoulder. She'd packed a small backpack with the basket her dad had made her, an extra set of clothes, a couple blankets, and a basic kit for the wilderness (matches, twine, some fish hooks, a hatchet). Colin's house was near the center of the village. His family lived above their blacksmith shop, where his father and mother made everything from nails to horseshoes to the various tools that eventually ended up with her dad for repair. They had moved from the country of Kota only a few years ago, bringing their expertise to the small town while escaping the bustling life aboard one of the Flying Cities. She loved to listen to Colin's dad, Kristoff, tell stories about the massive aircraft which rumbled through the sky like floating mountains.

Colin was outside when she arrived. He was tall and lanky, and whenever she stood near him she had to crane her neck a bit just to make eye contact. He had blonde hair, nearly the same colour as hers and people had often remarked they looked like siblings, except her eyes were brown, and his were a bright green. He was sitting on his porch, playing quietly on a mandolin. Kristoff had saved for years to get that imported from the capital and it had been Colin's pride and joy ever since. Colin had worked in the smithy until he was eighteen before his dad allowed him to stop. He still helped with selling product and shipping special orders out to surrounding villages but spent most of his time making music. He and Elise had been best friends since they were very young and the old folks had always fawned over the two when they played together.

He looked up from his music as she approached and flashed her a smile,

"Oh, you're back!" fake surprise dripped from the words.
"Good to know your confidence in me hasn't changed," she responded flatly.
"Gotta keep my expectations low, otherwise you're never going to impress me."
"You fucker," she laughed and pushed him playfully.

He set the mandolin down in its case and closed the lid,

"I actually need your help with something," Elise said.
"What's up?"
"My hunting trip was a wash, but yesterday morning I hit a buck."
"It got away?"
"Yeah," she sighed, "I was hoping you'd come back with me to the spot and bring your PFA. Help me try to spot him from the air."
"I mean yeah, that shouldn't be a problem. I gotta check with my dad, I know he's got an order coming in this week, but I don't think it's for a few days yet. You think we'll be gone long?"
"I'd like to be back tomorrow night. If we can't find it by then I'm just gonna call it done."
"Alright, gimme an hour and I'll meet you at the trailhead."

The order for Colin's dad wasn't expected for three days, so within a few hours the two of them were walking down the trail into the valley. The trail was always a beautiful hike; it had plenty of spots to stop and look at the view. Though the two of them were keeping a steady pace, they made sure to find a nice spot for lunch. The valley wasn't particularly more dangerous than the other forests around the village, but it was still nice to have another pair of eyes so the both of them could relax a little while they walked.

They got to the clearing where the buck had been shot a little before the sun had set completely. The forest floor was deep in shadow but the sunlight danced on the tops of the trees and made it look like they were ablaze. Colin got to work setting up a tent while Elise went to look for anything the deer may have left behind. She found the approximate spot it had been standing when she shot it. No blood anywhere. Maybe she had missed it after all. She frowned and crouched. She could see the grass ripped up where it had been eating, and the footprints in the mud. She followed the prints carefully back to the tree line, making note of the extra deep gouges where it had pushed off to leap back into the forest. In the trees though, it was now too dark to keep following them. She marked a couple trees near the place it entered and went back to Colin.

Colin had pulled out his PFA and had laid it out on a tarp. The Personal Flying Apparatus was designed like a pair of bat wings. Metal struts supported canvas membrane that spread out to either side of the central body. Two small Vein powered thrusters were set near the bottom of the body to assist with takeoffs and landing. Colin had made this one himself after looking at designs from professionals in the capital. She'd seem him crash it as many times as not, but it was a sturdy little machine. At the moment he had both the wings separated from the body and was cleaning the connections.

"If you break your leg tomorrow I'm not dragging you back to Birch."
"That was one time, and I would hardly call it a break."
"Your foot was turned all the way round."
"Yeah, more of a twist. No break."
"I'm going to break your leg if you say that again."

They laughed and Elise crawled into the tent.

"I was just about to get some food going," Colin said after her.
"I'll eat in the morning, I just wanna pass out right now."
"Suit yourself."

Elise listened to the sounds of Colin tinkering on the PFA for a bit longer before he got a fire going.

3.

Elise was up before Colin. He was snoring soundly beside her, and she did her best to sneak out of the tent. The sun was only just starting to peek into the valley and she listened to the morning song of the birds as she got the fire going again to make some coffee and porridge. Eventually Colin got up and sleepily accepted the coffee she'd made. The two sat in silence for a while as the clearing brightened. When they'd finished their breakfast, Colin got to work strapping the PFA to his back while Elise tried to pick up the deer's trail again, and then the two of them set off.

The PFA thrummed to life as Colin switched it on. The wings twisted and flexed, finding their center of gravity before spreading wide in preparation for take off. There were two ways to control the PFA: a pair of handles attached directly to the wings so that it could be turned manually, or a small control panel on the chest that allowed the machine to maintain level flight and do minor adjustments like turns and slow ascents and descents if the pilot needed the use of their hands. For the moment, Colin gripped the handles and pushed upwards. The thrusters lit up and launched him into the air. Elise watched him ascend and do a few loops of the clearing before he levelled out. She pointed in the direction of the tracks she was following and Colin began flying in that direction.

They spent a few hours like this. Elise following the tracks on the ground, and Colin doing wide circles in the air, coming back to make sure he was maintaining the right direction. The deer's trail lead them deeper and deeper in the valley until they were near the river that carved its way through the middle. Elise had been growing more and more frustrated. This deer wasn't acting like an injured animal, and seemed to have just been going about its day. She found several locations where it had laid down, but again found no blood. Around noon she stopped near the river bank where, presumably, the animal had stopped to drink. She stared into the water. The edge of the

river was shallow, but she knew from experience that it was both fast and deep near the center. She'd fallen in once while fishing with her dad when she was younger and he'd had to pull her out. She flagged Colin down and soon he was on the ground again.

"Are you sure you hit this thing Elise?" he was panting a bit from the flying, "We're a ways off from that clearing."
"I'm starting to think I really did miss," she sighed, "But the shot was perfect, I just don't understand how."
"Well," he began to shrug off the PFA, "You're not exactly an expert marksman."
"Shut up, this really sucks."
"Sorry," he said genuinely, "Listen. It took us half the day to get out here. If we turn back now, we can make some good time back towards Birch and be back by noon tomorrow."
"Yeah okay."
"Okay, gimme a second to eat something then we'll hit the road."
"Why don't you head back to where we camped out, I'll meet you there?"
"You sure?" he had already started folding up the wings, "It's not exactly a straight shot on foot."

Elise nodded. Colin set down the PFA and drew her into a hug. They stood there quietly for a minute, listening to the sounds of the river burble past them.

"Hey," Colin whispered.
"I'm fine," Elise whispered back, "Just frustrated."

He nodded and let go.

"Thanks," she said, "Sorry, it's dumb to be this worked up about a stupid deer."
"Nah," he shrugged, "I've been more worked up over less."
"Actually Colin," she grabbed his arm, "I think I'd prefer if you walked with me."
"I think we can make that happen, lemme just take it up one more time. I wanna show you a trick I've been practising."
"Oh you're gonna show me a cool trick on your little flying machine?" she made a face at him.
"Sovereign you're so mean. Fuck it, I don't wanna show you anymore."
"No! I was kidding! Show me please!"

He smirked and shook his head.

"Alright relax."

Colin strapped the PFA back on, and waited for it to find the center of gravity again. Then he took off into the air. This time however, he kept climbing. Twenty meters. Thirty meters. Fifty meters. Then he twisted suddenly and plunged downward. The wings tucked close to his body and he began to spin as he fell. A few meters above the tops of the trees he pulled his wings open and the sudden resistance turned his downward momentum into forward thrust and he shot above Elise, doing one more loop before he paused briefly in the air to shoot her a wink.

She didn't register the gunshot right away. She just saw the impact on Colin's shoulder ripple his muscles. Then she watched him plummet from the sky and out of sight as she heard the echoing

retort of the gun going off a second time. Panic gripped her heart and she began sprinting towards where Colin had went down. She came around the corner and saw him, half submerged on the riverbank, unmoving. She froze. Above Colin, stood the deer.

It was the same deer, no question. The large branching antlers were impossible to forget. It was sniffing Colin's head, and nudged him a couple times. When he groaned, the deer snorted and stood up. It stood up on its hind legs and Elise watched in horror as the thin limbs bulged with muscle. The hooves split, and split again until it had human-like hands on its front legs. Within seconds, what stood over Colin was no longer a deer. It was nearly eight feet tall, with a head that looked like a deer, but also looked almost human. The antlers had remained, but every inch of the creature seemed to be rippling with muscle. The thing that used to be a deer grabbed Colin's torso with one hand and one of his legs with the other. Before Elise could even scream, it pulled with such ferocity that Colin's leg was ripped clean off his body. Colin screamed in pain and fear as the adrenaline woke him up. The thing that used to be a deer stared at him for a moment, unfazed, then as easily as you might toss an apple, it threw Colin into the river.

It sat down on the bank and watched as Colin's writhing form was quickly pulled away. Elise continued to watch as it brought the leg up to its mouth. The moment its teeth bit into flesh she was shaken from her paralysis and screamed. She hadn't meant to scream, but it came out regardless. Even when the thing that used to be a deer turned to look at her, she couldn't stop herself from screaming. Even as it stood, and walked over to her, dragging Colin's leg in the mud, the scream continued. Only when it grabbed her with a hand so large it wrapped entirely around her torso, that the air was squeezed out and she could do nothing but cry terrified tears. The thing that used to be a deer lifted her up to its face next to one large eye. It snorted, then turned its head and opened its mouth.

"Stop!"

The voice came from the forest beside her. She turned her head and saw someone step out of the trees. The person carried a rifle set against their hip and pointed at the creature. They were wearing a mask over their face and a hood pulled low over the mask. A long tube dangled from the bottom of the mask, the end of it hidden somewhere in the person's many layers of clothing. Elise watched the person look from her, to the creature, to Colin's leg, and then back to the creature.

"Idiot thing," the person muttered, "One will have to do. Bring her."

The thing that used to be a deer carried her through the forest in one hand. It continued to consume Colin's leg as they walked, not even leaving the bones untouched. The crunching was overwhelming and she vomited more than once. Whenever she tried to scream, the thing that used to be a deer would squeeze her until she couldn't breathe. She tried to call out to the person with the gun but they ignored her. Eventually she gave up and just cried, but even her tears dried after a while.

The duo brought Elise deeper into the valley than she'd ever gone before. Their path took them into deep crevasses that she hadn't even known existed. They descended to the bottoms of these rocky wounds in the earth until they came to the mouth of a cave. Inside was damp, cramped, and

cold. She was slammed into walls, floors, and ceilings, despite the fact that the thing that used to be a deer seemed to be trying to hold her steady. After nearly an hour traversing the cave, they came to a large metal door blocking their way.

The thing that used to be a deer set her down on the cold stone. She briefly eyed the way they had came but the person in the mask tossed a rock at her and gestured at the rifle they were holding. Not like she had the energy to even stand right now, much less make a run for it. The thing that used to be a deer walked up to the door and placed both hands on it, putting visible effort into getting it open. Slowly, it slid along the stone, revealing a relatively normal looking room on the other side. She was brought into the room, and then the door was closed behind her. Once it was secure, the thing that used to be a deer sat down, with its back against the door, and seemed to be asleep within seconds.

Elise looked around the room. There were no windows. Vein powered lights covered the walls. One corner of the room had a bed and a few other homey furnishings, but the rest of it looked like someone had taken a look at her dad's workshop and thought that there wasn't quite enough mess. All sorts of trinkets and scrap, trash, papers, and pens were scattered across a dozen desks and machines she didn't recognize.

The person in the mask hung the rifle on a hook on the wall and shuffled over to the corner with the bed. They pulled their overcoat and hood off as well as their mask, tossing both on the bed and running their fingers through long white hair. The man turned to look at Elise.

"I have no intention of locking up that rifle, but if you try to get it, Stewart will tear you in half before you could take two steps. Then we would have done all this for nothing, and we'd have to start over again. Now, if you'd just go sit on that table for me."

He pointed at a metal slab in the center of the room, similar to the surgeon's table back in Birch. She didn't move. The man pinched his nose, which had been visibly broken and healed incorrectly.

"Please do not make me wake up Stewart. He gets very annoyed when I have to wake him."

Elise looked back at the thing that used to be a deer…Stewart, and shakily stood to her feet. Everything was sore. A dozen bruises were already forming from where she'd hit the walls, and her knees were still shaking from the shock of the whole situation. She stumbled her way over to the table and painfully lifted herself onto it. The man made his way over to the table after digging through a pile of junk and produced what appeared to be an oxygen tank with a face mask attached. He held it out to her.

"Something for the pain."

She shook her head. The man rolled his eyes and, with a speed she was not expecting, grabbed the back of her head and shoved the mask onto her face. As she started to fight back there was a loud hiss and a green smoke poured out. It stung as it touched her skin and she immediately started to cough at the smell. Unable to pull herself away from the mans grip, she flailed helplessly as her coughing forced more and more of the smoke into her lungs. The room started to fade, and the last thing she saw was the man gently laying her down on the table, shaking his head as he did so.

4.

A vast and empty landscape stretched out before her. Dark crags and crevasses, dead trees sticking out of the ground like fingers, and a harsh wind carving its way through everything. The sky was filled with oily black clouds that rippled and rolled like they were trying to reach down and touch the earth. She stood at edge of a precipice. A sheer cliff, dropping down what seemed like thousands of feet to jagged rocks below her. She tried to back up but found herself pressed against the cliff, only a few inches for her feet to stand on. She tried to slow her breathing and realized even taking a long deep breath felt like she was suffocating. Her heart felt like it was trying to break free from her rib cage.

Then the cliff rumbled.

She let out a yelp as the wall behind her began pushing her forward. The rock was physically moving, shrinking the already minuscule gap she had to stand on. She grabbed at the wall, trying to find any purchase for her hands but it seemed that every crack was too shallow, and every rock sticking out crumbled the second she touched it. She watched helplessly as the small ledge she was balancing on vanished and she fell. She screamed, scrambling desperately at the cliff as she fell past it, but it seemed like it was always just out of reach. The ground rushed up to meet her, the jagged rocks like the teeth of some enormous beast waiting to swallow her whole.

She slammed into the ground and felt every bone in her body break. Pain coursed through her like fire. But she was still alive. Confused and in shock she tried to move but only sent more waves of pain through her as she heard and felt the grinding of her bones against each other. The ground beneath her shifted and she was barely able to make sense of it as she fell through the earth. Between the waves of pain she watched the oily clouds pull away from her. Rocks and debris fell with her but instead of getting dark, there was light below her. And heat.

By the time she hit the magma, her brain had stopped trying to make sense of what was happening and just started shutting down. She felt the impact onto the liquid rock, but it was distant, like it was being described to her by someone else. She heard the high pitched whine as her flesh boiled and fell away but it reminded her of her mom putting on the kettle and she wondered what kind of tea her mother would make to help her feel better after this. She stared, curiously, at her hand as her exposed muscles and bone caught fire. She frowned, her last thought one of confusion as she saw thin silvery veins wrapped around the bones of her arms and hands like a spiderweb. Then, nothing.

Elise's eyes snapped open. She was looking up at the sky; cloudy, overcast, grey. She felt the muddy riverbank beneath her, freezing against her skin. She was naked. Everything hurt. She raised her arm to her head but stopped as she saw the skin. A thin scar stared at her. She followed the length of it with her eyes. The pale white line spiraled up around her forearm, past her elbow, up over her shoulder and out of sight. She examined the rest of her body and found more scars. Dozens of them, in various places, all clean, thin lines that danced across her skin. Her heart raced.

"What did you do to me?"

The thought slipped out as words, and they landed heavily in the silence of the forest. She scrambled to her feet in a panic. Her muscles screamed at her, but she ignored them. She looked around frantically but there was only the river. Trying desperately to get her bearings she began walking along it, falling more than once as her muscles gave out from the pain. She wasn't sure how long she'd been walking when she found one of her dad's tree stands. It wasn't much, but the relief of seeing it felt like a soft blanket wrapped around her. She couldn't muster the strength to climb the tree, but she sat down beneath it and tried to catch her breath. She closed her eyes and exhaustion overtook her, and she fell asleep.

5.

She woke to darkness and a low rumbling sound from somewhere above her. Confused she looked up and saw small lights blinking in the sky. Then a larger light turned on and shone a beam into the forest nearby. Fear gripped her as the beam swept back and forth across the trees before finally landing on top of her. She squinted upwards, shading her eyes with her hand in an attempt to see. A bell began ringing frantically above and suddenly there were people dropping out of the sky and landing beside her. Hands grabbed her gently, but firmly, and the air was filled with shouting. She couldn't keep track of the words, but she heard her name and realized one of the people was kneeling on the ground beside her. They were wearing a leather helmet and large glass goggles. She saw their lips moving and tried to focus.

"Are you Elise von Carr?" the person repeated.

Elise nodded and tried to speak but was too overwhelmed by the light and movement and noise around her. A large wooden board was placed on the ground beside her and she was lifted on top of it. As leather straps were tightened around her waist and shoulders the person beside her spoke again.

"We're gonna get you home, okay? Just hang on tight."

They stood up and stepped back as she felt herself lifted off the ground. She briefly saw a patch on the jacket of the person who had been speaking to her. An inverted triangle with the silhouette of an airplane in the middle and the numeral 3 highlighted in the silhouette. Then she was pulled upwards towards the light and she lost sight of the people on the ground.

She emerged from the spotlight into a large metal room. Girders stretched above her like the ribs of some enormous beast. Everything lurched to one side and she felt the room begin to move. More hands grabbed the board she was lying on and pulled her over to one side before setting her down on the metal floor. She looked to her left and saw a large hole in the floor. The tops of trees brushed by, briefly illuminated by the spotlight. One by one, people climbed up through the hole, helped by those already in the room. A man in a white lab coat knelt next to her and began asking questions. She did her best to answer them but she could hardly keep track of what he was saying, much less form coherent sentences. Eventually he stopped and helped her to her feet. He walked with her across the room to a pair of chairs bolted to the wall. Someone had already laid a blanket across the metal seats and backs, and when she sat down she was handed another blanket. She stared at the empty seat beside her as the man in the white coat crouched in front of her.

He had black hair, in tight curls, with a tightly groomed beard to match. For a second, she could have sworn he had yellow eyes, but it must have been the reflection of the overhead lights because he blinked and they were a dark brown.

"Elise. My name is Doctor Chambers."
"What's going on?"
"We're bringing you back to Birch. We've been looking for you for almost a week."
"That," she frowned, "That can't be right. I just left town yesterday."
"I know you're going to have a million questions but I just need you to focus. There was someone else with you when you left town."
"Colin," her breath caught in her throat, and she nodded.
"Yes," Doctor Chambers nodded as well, "We've been unsuccessful in finding him."

Elise felt heat behind her eyes and she began to cry. The image of Colin being held in the air by that monster burned into her mind like a brand.

"He's gone. I couldn't stop it," she tucked her legs up on the chair.
"I'm sorry but I just have one last question," He looked visibly uncomfortable, "Do you know what country he was born in?"
"Kota," she looked at him through the tears, confused, "He and his parents moved here from Kota a few years back."

The Doctor nodded grimly.

"Okay. Thank you. Get some rest, we'll be in Birch soon."

He stood up and walked across the room. She watched him move past the group of people who had climbed out of the hole in the floor. They were all sitting in chairs like hers, though without the blankets. Doctor Chambers walked through a doorway on the far wall and out of sight. Elise felt another wave of emotion wash over her and she shoved her face into her knees.

"*She knew he was from Kota,*" she heard the Doctor say.

Elise's head shot up. He hadn't come back in the room, but the conversation continued, a woman's voice this time.

"*Well then that makes things simple.*"
"*Captain...she was out here for a week. No clothes, no weapons found around her. She looked scared.*"
"*Are you suggesting we break protocol?*"
"*She's just a kid.*"
"*Then when we get back to Koshire you can explain to the crew why they're being strung up in front of their families.*"
"*...Captain.*"

The voices sounded like they were being whispered right into her ear. The room lurched and she felt the movement stop, then the whole room started moving downward before eventually coming

to a stop. The wall on the opposite side from the door the Doctor stepped through began to move. It tilted down away from the room, coming to a stop on the dirt of the town square, creating a ramp. There was a small crowd gathered, it looked like most of the town. Elise was helped to her feet and down the ramp. Her parents were waiting and when she saw them she hobbled as fast as she could down the ramp and into her their arms. All three of them were crying.

Elise watched as one of the people who helped her down the ramp walked over to Colin's parents. She watched as their faces, filled with hope a moment before, twisted with grief. They didn't scream. There was no crying. Colin's dad met Elise's gaze and she saw rage in his eyes. He started walking towards her and her parents but before he could take two steps the person speaking to them stepped in his way. Elise looked away and saw her mother staring in his direction as well, her brow creased. She tapped Elise's dad on the hip and gestured towards their home. They began walking away and Elise saw the metal room she had been in was in fact the belly of an airship larger than her house. The same symbol that she'd seen on the jacket earlier was painted on the side.

Her mother wheeled through the door with a focused look on her face. Elise had been leaning on her father for the walk back, but about halfway there pain had flooded back into her system and he just carried her the rest of the way. He hurried over to the couch and set her down gently.

"I'm going to make some tea, and maybe bacon. You must be starving."

He hugged her tightly, then walked into the kitchen wiping tears from his eyes. Her mother rolled into their bedroom and out of sight. Elise could hear her rummaging around through boxes. By the time the smell of bacon began to fill the house, her mother came back into the living room. She was carrying a duffle bag on her lap, and a clean set of clothes which she handed to Elise.

"Elise. You need to listen to me carefully. I've put a weeks worth of clothes in here, as well as several bags of silver. Rest tonight, and then in the morning we're going to leave town for a bit."
"What?"
"Eloie," Eric's voice was hesitant, "You can't be serious."
"You know how serious I am Eric."
"Mom, please, I don't understand."

Eloie took the duffle bag and set it on the floor, then gently took Elise's hand, briefly examining the new scars.

"Those Kota soldiers are going to try to take you away. It started a few years back as some misguided self preservation but now," She gritted her teeth, "If they suspect that someone was involved with the death of a Kota citizen, even an expatriate, that person has to stand trial in a Kota city."

Elise sat up. She'd never seen her mother so serious. Her father sat down on the couch beside her and put the plate of bacon in her lap.

"Careful, that's hot. Eloie, they have no reason to believe she could have done anything, and anyone in this town would vouch for her."
"Didn't you see Kristof? He was ready to grab her then and there."
"Why didn't they then?"
"They don't want to make a scene," Eloie shook her head, "They know this isn't palatable, but if they go home with nothing...Elise slow down."

Elise paused, her mouth full of bacon, a bit of oil dribbled down her chin and her father wiped it away. He jerked his hand back as he touched the hot oil and quickly stuck his finger in his mouth.

"How the hell are you eating that?"
"It's not that hot," Elise shrugged, "Maybe you should stop being a baby."

Her father frowned, but her mother snapped her fingers to get their attention.

"Focus. They'll probably make a big show of leaving in the morning, and then send a small team to "explain" that Elise has to come back to Kota for more questioning. I'd give it an hour after sunrise. So get some sleep, and we'll leave in the morning."
"Into the valley?" Eric shook his head, "We could make our way to the river but there aren't any trails after that so maybe a boat?"
"That's too exposed," Eloie frowned, "I knew I should have gotten that Vein chair."
"It was a little gaudy."
"I like gaudy."
"That's why we're living here right?"

The house fell silent, aside from the sounds of Elise mindlessly finishing off the bacon. Then she heard a loud snap outside. Immediately the image of "Stewart" popped into her head and her hands began to shake.

"What's wrong?" Her dad's voice was filled with sudden concern.
"It's back, it's outside!" she hissed through her teeth.
"What is?"

The three of them jumped as someone knocked loudly at the door. Eric patted Elise's leg and stood up.

"It's okay, see, just someone checking in on us," he shot Eloie a look of apprehension and walked to the door.

Elise twisted to look over the back of the couch at her father. He squinted through the window and then opened the door. He filled the doorframe and Elise could just barely make out the outline of someone standing on the porch.

"Kristoff, we weren't expecting anyone this late," he gestured towards the figure, "Why have you got that, friend?"
"I want to see her," Kristoff's voice was hoarse and quiet, "I *need* to see her."
"I'm sure she wants to see you too, I know how much she cared for Colin."

The figure nodded.

"Why don't you leave that here on the chair, and come inside? I've just remembered I forgot to put tea on, but it won't take a second to get that started."

Elise suddenly felt heat build up quickly along her spine. It ran up from her hips and wrapped around her skull, then spread down her arms and legs to the tips of her fingers and toes. In an instant Kristoff came into focus, as well as the sawed off over/under shotgun he carried in one hand. It didn't get brighter outside, but suddenly she could see him in full detail, as well as the front yard, and the trees on the far side. She could see a half dozen people in dark clothes crouched in the tree line, aiming rifles at her father. It looked like two of them were talking frantically. She wondered what they were saying and all of a sudden she could hear them.

"*Where the FUCK did he get a gun?*"
"*I don't know sir, I swear he was searched beforehand.*"
"*Yeah well obviously not fucking well enough!*"

Elise looked at her mother with wide eyes.
"They're here."
"Who?"
"Kota. They're outside, in the trees."
"How do you...are you sure?"

Elise nodded.

"Okay. Take this," she lifted the duffle bag off the floor, "Go out the back. Get into the valley, follow the river, but stay in the trees, and get to the capital. Your father and I will sort this out, we'll send them in the wrong direction, then we'll meet you there."
"Mom," Elise tried not to let her voice shake but she couldn't help it.
"Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

"Kristoff put it down!"

Elise looked over in time to see her father make a grab for the shotgun. Kristoff instinctively pulled back, and the gun discharged as he did. The slug tore through her father's knee and he fell screaming to the porch. Kristoff stared in horror. Behind him, the soldiers began sprinting from the tree line, shouting at him. Elise watched as he looked towards them, back to her father, and then up at her. He raised the gun at her. Eloie grabbed Elise by the arm and yanked her down as he fired. Elise landed half in her mother's lap and half on the floor. She felt her mother's grip tighten.

Elise looked up in horror to see blood pouring from her mother's neck, covering Elise and the floor in seconds. The slug had impacted just above her collarbone, splitting flesh and shattering bone. Eloie gasped for air and locked eyes with Elise for a moment before slumping over in her chair. Elise felt numb. She squeezed her mother's hand desperately but Eloie did not squeeze back.

Elise stood shakily to her feet in time to see a soldier tackle Kristoff from behind as he tried to load more shells into the gun. Three soldiers moved onto the porch, another knelt next to Eric to inspect

his knee and the sixth entered the house. He stared at Elise, naked and covered in blood, and shifted his gaze quickly to Eloie slumped in the chair. The soldier let go of his rifle with one hand and spoke into a radio,

"Echo to Alpha, our civilian smuggled a firearm, I've got one wounded, one deceased. Target is in hand. Please advise."
"Copy Echo. Standby," the radio crackled then went silent.

The solider kneeling next to her dad pulled out a leather strap and began to apply a tourniquet. Kristoff was pulled off the porch and, after he wouldn't stop struggling, was pushed onto his face in the grass. The radio crackled again,

"Alpha to Echo. Command says it's FUBAR. Purge and extract. Leave the civilian for local law enforcement."
"Copy Alpha," the soldier raised his rifle at Elise, "On your knees! Get on your knees!"

Elise couldn't focus. There was too much happening. She was trying to piece things together in her brain, but everything was moving so slowly. The soldier shouted again and approached her, placing an arm on her shoulder to force her to the ground. Behind him, she watched as the soldier next to her father stopped working on the tourniquet and pulled out a pistol. Another pulled out a bottle with a rag sticking out the top, ignited the rag with a lighter, and threw it through a window. The shattering of glass and sudden flames dragged her mind out of its spiral. Everything suddenly came into focus again as the solider pushed on her shoulder. She felt the heat on her spine again and pushed the soldier away. Except, instead of moving him, her hand sunk into his chest, though the body armour and into warm flesh. Steam poured from where her arm had cut through and the soldier screamed. Shocked she pulled her hand away and watched in horror as her own skin and muscle peeled away, leaving only bone, spiderwebbed with thin silvery cords. Pain erupted from her arm as the flesh peeled away.

"What the fuck?" one of the soldiers in the door shouted.

The one that had pulled the pistol out raised it and fired. She felt the bullets hit but didn't feel any pain from them. Anger flared inside her and she ran, screaming, at the soldiers in the door. They scrambled backwards, but the one who'd thrown the molotov wasn't fast enough. She leapt at him, tackling him off the porch and onto the grass. She screamed again grabbing at his armour and felt her fingers sink through the fabric and metal once again into soft flesh. She tore chunks of the solider out by the fistful and blood gushed from the wound and poured from his mouth. Gunfire erupted around her as the soldiers began shooting. They had pulled away from the house, kneeling in the grass, pressed against walls, anywhere they could reasonably put something between them and her. She didn't understand why she was doing this, but she was in a frenzy. All she felt was anger. It pulled her towards the soldiers, and made her ignore the bullets that struck her. She briefly realized both her arms now were just bone and silver up to just past her elbows, but she didn't linger long on it.

The third soldier she reached tried to pull out a knife and she grabbed at his wrist to try and knock the knife away. Her fingers wrapped around the mans arm and he screamed as more steam

erupted from the contact. She pulled, hoping the knife would fall from his hand, instead, his arm tore at the elbow and he fell backwards, leaving her holding his limp wrist and bloody forearm. A part of her tried to make sense of it, but then something impacted the back of her head and the anger surged again. She dropped the forearm and turned. Two of the soldiers had moved up behind her with clubs, and one had just struck her with his. He looked immediately regretful when he saw it had no effect, but the regret didn't last long. She pushed him with both hands away from her and he was lifted off the ground. He flew ten feet away before landing, his head striking the ground with a sickening smack.

Elise paused. The heat burning on her spine, and the anger, pulled her towards the next soldier but she fought it, trying to focus. The last two soldiers dropped their weapons. The one farther back turned and ran, while the one near her fell to his knees and raised his hands. He was the one who had been tending to her father. The image of him pulling out the pistol flashed vividly in her eye, taking over her vision. She shook her head, but it flashed again and she watched as the image pressed the barrel against her fathers head. She felt her hands wrap around the mans neck. She didn't remember moving. He was trying to scream but she was squeezing to hard. Steam wrapped up around his head from where her fingers touched his skin, obscuring his face. She felt his flesh melting under her fingers and then bone cracked.

The soldier fell lifeless to the ground.

The sixth man and Kristoff had vanished into the trees. Behind her, the fire had engulfed the house. The anger faded and was replaced with fear. She stared, terrified at her arms, as she watched the muscles slowly wind their way back onto the bone like serpents. Flesh knitted itself back together over top of them and within moments they were good as new.

"Elise."

Her head snapped up and she saw her father on the porch, flames licking at the boards near him as he weakly reached out to her. She ran over and dragged him away from the burning house. She sat down on the grass and lay his head in her lap. His leg had been severed at the knee, and the ragged flesh was pale. A thick trail of blood followed them off the porch and onto the grass. Too much blood.

"Elise," he repeated, reaching up to her face, "Elise, your mother?"
"She's..." her voice caught in her throat.

Eric's hand found her shoulder and squeezed.

"Go," he coughed, "You gotta go now. Go to the capital. You'll be safe there."
"Dad no. I'm not leaving you," she took his hand, "They shot me. I'm not going anywhere."
"You look," he coughed again, "You look fine to me."

Elise frowned and looked down. She knew she'd been shot. The man with the pistol, the rifles outside. But her dad was right. She didn't see a single bullet wound. Not so much as a scratch.

"I don't understand. Dad what's going on?"

He didn't respond.

6.

She'd watched the airship take off the next morning and made sure to go in the opposite direction. A caravan had picked her up a few days later. She could only imagine how she'd looked to these people, barely any clothing, covering in mud and leaves from running through the forest.

The caravan was small. A young man, Andrew, his wife, Sarah, and Andrew's grandfather Sully. Travelling with them was an older man, Ivan, and his adult daughter, Nina. She and Nina had become fast friends, she was the one who suggested Elise join them, but Elise heard her arguing with Ivan the night after and he'd kept his distance from her since then. Sully was a travelling merchant, and had hired Ivan as muscle a few years ago. They were travelling their regular route to the capital, and were about halfway there. The caravan was made up of two motorcars. A large one which carried all of Sully's goods (general supplies like pots and pans and other things that people would rather pay money for instead of making themselves), and a smaller one with seating in the front and a few bunks in the back for particularly bad weather or if they needed to travel through the night.

"Should be another month and a half before we arrive," he'd explained once Elise had gotten settled, "We have a few stops to make, but as long as you pull your weight OR don't eat our food, you're welcome to stick around till then."

She'd been more than happy to do something other than bushwhacking. Nina gave her some of her clothes to wear and Sarah loaned her a few books from the small library she kept in a footlocker. Andrew and Sully were expert conversationalists and it was a rare occasion that neither of their voices could be heard from somewhere in the camp. Ivan did his best to avoid Elise, and he didn't try to hide it. Given the size of the Caravan it would have been obvious regardless but Nina promised time and again that he was just 'like that' and would warm up eventually.

Their first stop was a mountainside mining town called Colstown. It was larger than Birch, though Elise wasn't surprised considering it's position on a main road, and was bustling with energy. Sully was known here and shortly after they'd pulled the motorcars into what was obviously a regular spot they got swarmed with customers. Sully got right to work collecting items from people's lists and Andrew began taking commissions for repairs. Sarah and Ivan took several large empty bags into town in order to restock food and hygienic supplies while Nina dragged Elise over to a bakery promising 'the best coffee she'd ever tasted'.

The bakery was cozy. It had a little seating area off to one side, away from the counter, and Nina sat Elise down at a table by the window and told her to wait while she grabbed coffee. Elise watched her greet the girl at the counter and start up a conversation, then turned her attention out the window. Colstown was basically alien compared to what she was used to in Birch. It had been fully kitted out with Vein. Streetlights, powered down during the day of course, flanked the flagstone main street. All the infrastructure for the Vein was likely underground. It usually didn't need maintenance, to her understanding, so there was no point in stringing it out where everyone could see. She imagined closer to the mines, where the towns original buildings were, there would be exposed Vein lines, but this part of town had been built with Vein in mind.

Elise frowned and looked down at her hands. She remembered watching her flesh melt away and the thin, silvery cords wrapped around her bones. It had to be Vein. What else could it possibly be? But why? She clenched her hands into fists and then jumped when Nina set a mug down on the table in front of her.

"Coffee, hot and fresh, just a bit of sugar and cream. They roast their own beans here so it's better to not dilute the flavour."
"Thanks," Elise picked up the mug and took a sip, it was earthy and bitter, with a hint of some kind of citrus, "Oh, that is very good."
"I told you! Best coffee I ever-Elise!"

Elise looked over at her and raised an eyebrow as she took a deep gulp.

"What?"
"Didn't that hurt? I warned you it was hot."
"Oh uh," Elise wiped her mouth and frowned at the steam coming off both their coffees, "No, it didn't."
"You must have a better tolerance for it than I do," Nina leaned in, "Wanna hear some gossip?"

Elise leaned in as well. Nina took a sip of coffee and brushed her hair behind her ear.

"Aerin told me a Kota ship landed in town yesterday, but not like, a merchant ship."

Elise choked.

"I know! She said there were soldiers on board. They went and spoke with the mayor, then left an hour after they got here."
"What did they want?"
"She didn't know," Nina shrugged, "She doesn't know anyone in the mayor's office. I bet they were looking for expats to bring home. They do that sometimes right?"

Elise brought the mug to her lips and drank in order to avoid answering. It had to be a different ship, she told herself. But then again, how many non-merchant Kota ships were out here? It was too much of a coincidence. She shook her head and set the coffee down.

"You okay?"
"Yeah," Elise mumbled, "Just tired. I'm gonna head back to camp to rest for a bit."
"What? We just sat down! Also I'd avoid the caravan today. Crowds are always nuts on the first day, and Sully will just drag you into selling if he spots you sitting around in a tent."
"I just..."
"Elise, come on, new town, fun things to do. You can be tired later. Listen, there's a seamstress down the road who makes the most beautiful dresses you've ever seen, and there's a smithy near the mine who makes like...artsy weapons. Sometimes he even has stuff from the other families and last time we were here he told me he was trying to get some stuff from Talon. I want to see if he got any in."
"Talon?"

"Wow," Nina rolled her eyes and laughed, "You really didn't get out much. Come on, I've got cool stuff to show you."

Shae's Seams was impressive. Nina spent most of her time in there trying on various dresses while Elise spoke with Shae about the various stitches and techniques she used. The dresses were extravagant in a variety of ways. Some were gaudy and layered with frills and gold, and even jewels sewed into a few. Others were simple, with only one or two colours or fabrics. There were even a couple with the stitching hidden so well that they looked like they were a single piece of fabric. They were all incredible. Shae explained that she really should move to the capital, but she just couldn't give up her life here.

Nina took a few notes for Sully, and a list of dresses Shae was hoping they'd take with them to sell in the capital, before leading Elise off of the main street and towards the mine. Elise had been right that this part of town had not been uprooted to accommodate for Vein. Tall poles had been erected in various locations along the road and Vein (wrapped in black rubber) was strung across them, occasionally branching off to the various homes and businesses to power them. Trucks rumbled down the road constantly transporting rock debris, raw iron, and who knows what else to various parts of town.

The smithy didn't have a name above it's enormous front door. The inside was set up much differently than the blacksmith shop in Birch. Instead of the forge being up front, open to the public, she didn't see it at all. She could hear the banging of metal on metal so she assumed it was in the back of the building. Instead, she and Nina stepped into a room filled with waist high glass display cases. The cases were lit with tiny Vein lights that made the weapons and armour pieces within shine brilliantly. The ceilings were high, easily fifteen feet, and gave the whole store an air of fanciness Elise had not been expecting. There were only two other people in the storefront, a woman inspecting a wall of beautifully painted shields, and a man in a soldiers uniform walking up and down a display case filled with daggers.

Elise walked slowly through the cases, marveling at the craftmanship on display. Nina had been right about the weapons being "artsy". Elise wasn't well versed in weapon making, but even she could see that some of the designs were never meant to be swung in any real capacity. There was a sword designed to look like a spine, another like a branch with the blade designed like a leaf, she saw a large halberd (at least she assumed it was a halberd) that looked like a peacock feather. Others had more functional blade designs but with extravagant handles and cross guards, she was drawn to one that looked like spreading tree branches but recoiled a bit and quickly moved away when she realized it was actually a deer's head with large antlers.

"Nina!" a voice boomed from the back of the room, "And you brought a friend. Hopefully she actually has money eh?"

Elise looked over and saw a man with a thick beard step through a door at the back of the store. He was dressed in light clothing and a heavy apron and was covered in soot and grease and sweat, a stark difference from the tidy interior of the shop. He was also easily ten feet tall and had an extra set of arms. He was an Oldaar, one of the Gresit known for their enormous size and strength. Nina hadn't actually met an Oldaar before, but she'd heard stories and knew that the extra arms were

unusual even by their standards.

"If we had money we wouldn't be here," Nina laughed and the Oldaar put a hand to his chest in fake offense, "Yetu this is Elise."

Yetu crossed the room in a few large strides and held out a hand in a clenched fist towards Elise. Elise stared at it for a minute then clenched her own hand and gently tapped his.

"Never met an Oldaar before, I can tell," he chuckled and offered the same greeting to Nina.
"She's from a small town, Birch, never left it before," Nina bumped his hand.
"Why don't you ever bring me people with money Nina?"
"When I find people with money, I'll bring them here straight away."

Yetu laughed again and walked back to the counter. He kept his second set of arms clasped behind his back as he walked, presumably to keep from knocking into things.

"So what are you here for Nina?"
"Well, I remembered the last time we were in you said you might be getting something from Talon. Any luck with that?"

Yetu's eyes lit up and he held up a finger.

"Wait right there, you're gonna love this."

He shuffled through the door in the back wall and shortly after Elise could hear what sounded like a heavy lid being raised and lowered. Another moment and he came back through the door holding a heavy looking, egg shaped metal object, with a flat bottom. He used his second arms to lift a heavy cloth onto the counter top before setting the egg down. He then unlatched the top of the egg and lifted it off, setting it down on the cloth next to him. Elise and Nina moved closer and saw a fairly plain looking sword in a thick sheath.

"I'm confused," Elise said.
"Show her!" Nina practically shouted.
"Alright, step back ladies," Yetu picked up the sword and waited for them to move.

Nina took a few steps back and dragged Elise with her. Elise noticed the woman and the solider had drifted closer to inspect the commotion. Once Yetu was satisfied with their distance he pulled the sword from the sheath. It glowed white hot and Elise saw Nina flinch. Yetu seemed uncomfortable as well. Elise felt nothing. The glow from the sword brightened up the room and Yeto turned the sword slowly from one side to the other. It looked like a dagger in his hands.

"Normally," he said, "You'd have to wear a special suit to wield this. I'm used to the forge so I can stand it for a couple seconds but any longer and I'll start to tan.

He pushed the sword back into the sheath. Nina ran up to it in awe and then turned to Elise,

"Talon makes all sorts of weapons like this. The blade is pure Vein and they have a special technique that makes it burn super hot like that! I heard it can cut through anything!"

Elise followed her slowly and inspected the weapon.

"Can I hold it?" Elise asked.
"Well," Yetu rubbed the back of his neck, "I've got a suit coming from Talon later this week, and I've been working on a design myself, so if you can wait a couple days till I have that."
"No I'd like to try it now."
"I don't think I can let you do that, for your own safety."
"I'll be careful."

Yetu looked at Nina and back at Elise.

"Okay...but I won't be held liable if you get burned."
"I said I'd be careful."

Nina frowned and stepped back again, and Yetu backed up as well. Elise gripped the hilt and began to pull the sword out. The glow lit up the room again and both Nina and Yetu flinched. Elise still didn't feel anything. She drew it all the way out and held it in front of her, squinting to inspect the blade. She could see, through the glow, the silvery shimmer of the Vein blade. Carved into the metal, she saw a name *Curran*. Without thinking she ran a finger along the carved name. Yetu and Nina shouted at the same time and Elise felt a surge of energy and the blade pulsed with a flash of light so brilliant she had to turn away. She heard Nina scream and Yetu swore loudly. Embarrassed, she put the sword back in the sheath, but the embarrassment changed quickly to concern as she saw Nina clutching her eyes. Yetu had a hand on her back and Elise moved out of the way as the soldier ran over.

"Is anyone hurt?" his voice was calm but Elise could hear well hidden concern.
"My eyes, it feels like they're burning!" Nina gasped, visibly in pain.
"Here, let me see."

He gently pulled Nina's hands from her face, revealing the red skin underneath. Elise heard him breathe in sharply. The whites of Nina's eyes were a deep red, and they darted around without ever finding purchase.

"Why can't I see?" her breathing sped up as Elise watched the panic set in, "What's going on?"
"I'm going to get her a doctor, you two are together right?" the soldier turned to Elise, "Can you-"

He froze when they locked eyes. She saw the colour drain from his face. The hair on her arms stood on end and everything but the soldier seemed to get a little blurry. She saw his pupils contract, watched the vein in his neck begin to pulse rapidly, noticed beads of sweat begin to form on his forehead. Then everything shifted back to normal as he pulled on his uniform collar and tie.

"I'm going to get her a doctor," he repeated, not taking his eyes of Elise, "Get her to uh, get her in a chair. Wait here."

He left the shop, along with the other woman. Yetu pulled a chair from behind the counter and lifted Nina into it. Once he was confident she was settled he scooped up the sword, put it back in the egg container, and took it out of the room. Nina reached a hand out.

"Elise, what happened?"
"I...touched the blade," she sat down on the floor next to the chair and Nina's hand found her shoulder.
"Yeah...I saw you do that. Is your hand okay?"

Elise nodded, then after a moment of silence remembered that Nina couldn't see and said yes out loud. Nina nodded and squeezed Elise's shoulder as Yetu walked back into the room.

"Nina," he said in a soft voice, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know it could do that."

As he and Nina spoke, Elise's focus drifted back to the door. That soldier had recognized her, she was sure of it. What she wasn't sure of is what that meant. She thought it was unlikely that news of what happened in Birch had reached Colstown so quickly, then she remembered the airship Nina's friend had told her about.

The soldier never returned. Instead, a few minutes later a military vehicle pulled to a stop in front of the store. Two nurses in white uniforms and a doctor with a large leather bag stepped out. They made their way inside and gently began seeing to Nina. Elise kept her distance, nervously watching the door. When they had finished, the doctor confirmed that Elise would be able to get Nina back to her family, then left them alone in the store.

They had wrapped gauze around her head, covering her eyes. Yetu gave Nina a hug, apologized again, checked a final time to make sure Elise was okay, then sent them on their way. Elise watched him flip the open sign to closed and lock the door behind them.

Elise couldn't stop thinking about the soldier. She kept looking over her shoulder, as if expecting to catch him peering out from behind a corner. The paranoia continued during the walk back to the caravan. It pulled her focus as Ivan berated her for getting Nina hurt. Ever after everyone had gone to bed that evening, it gnawed at her mind. Eventually she couldn't stand it anymore and slipped away from the caravan to try and get her mind thinking about anything else.