

Chapter 01

“In our ancient mythos, Pyrrha was the daughter of Pandora – the first human. Pandora, in her curiosity, unleashed the evils of the world on humanity, but most importantly, she preserved hope. It was that hope that allowed humanity to persevere through the worst of times, and it is that hope with which we send the Pyrrha project to unexplored lengths, impossible lengths, in the hope of humanity surviving another catastrophe.”

Every Orphan heard the same words on their “sixteenth birthday.” There was no hiding what they were, no hiding what they had done, but they held back a full description until the children were old enough to withstand the shock that would inevitably come. Some handled it better than others, but everything they chose to do was to ensure that the children had the best humanity had to offer, despite their impossible situation.

“Today, you will step for the first time into a new world, into the real world. We have done everything we can to protect you, but the mission will soon be yours. As we speak, your friends and cousins are being told the same things, the same stories. Tomorrow, when you see them, you’ll understand that everything is different – but remains ever the same. Please know that we never meant to deceive you, but the truth would be too much for a child. In truth, it may yet be. But we have faith in you, faith in what you have become in the safety of Reverie.”

One such Orphan, Ashkii, listened to the words of his adoptive parents. He listened as they explained what Reverie was – an elaborate virtual reality of connected stasis chambers aboard the Pyrrha, where he and all the other Orphans had been born and raised. This part, he and most children his age had discovered long ago. The Caretakers were not deceitful and encouraged questions and curiosity. But they held off on the purpose of the project until they were sure the children were ready.

They explained that the Orphans were the last of humanity. The last of any who had once lived in the galaxy we called home. The simulation was modeled after their ancestral home of Earth, with caretakers programmed from the numerous volunteers that helped set up this project. It was a place for the last children, the Orphans, to grow safely during their journey. Now, that long journey was coming to a close. However, there was still much to prepare. They assured him that every peer he had met was indeed a human, though, born aboard the Pyrrha like him.

This sudden change of fate came to a shock as most, and that was to be expected. Ashkii stopped his adoptive mother from speaking by holding up a hand and looked up to them from the living room couch in their city center apartment among the Reverie. His words made his two virtual parents smile.

“I want to see it – the real world, outside of Reverie.”

Ashkii felt his eyes open. He took a deep breath as he looked around. His eyes dwelt on the frost crystals spreading and fading away around him. He lay on a bed, naked, with two tubes running from small ports in his chest. One carried red liquid, the other a silver he didn't recognize. He felt a bit of warmth rushing down his spine. The chill fading to heat made him gasp. The timing was near perfect. As he let out a breath in surprise, the crystalline enclosure faded enough for him to sit up – and what remained faded to mist soon after.

He looked up and down himself to see if he recognized himself. His body was identical here as it was in the Reverie. That was both a disappointment and a relief to him. His eyes then glanced to either side. He could see a corridor stretching into the darkness, lined with identical beds like his. All of them still had enclosures built up around them.

He felt pins and needles throughout his body for a moment until there was the unmistakable sound of a computerized voice. In the Reverie, the voice served as a personal assistant, and from the sounds of its, things were no different here.

“Good morning Ashkii,” The voice spoke near him. It was calming and familiar, but for the first time so incredibly foreign. It continued without pause for a response. “Your stasis ports will disengage automatically when you are safe to stand.”

The explanation came only seconds before a hiss from each port in his chest, then a click. The connected tubes retracted into the bed and away from his body. When he took a breath, he knew it was his first without the machine. It felt different, more natural in ways that were impossible to put into words, but only different enough to make him think about it that first time.

“You are free to explore the Pyrrha, Ashkii.” The computerized voice added.

He didn't wait long, twisting his hips and throwing his legs over the side of the bed. He felt them dangle there before he realized that there was no gravity here. He let out a small laugh and pushed off the pod, floating up just a bit as he did. “Thank you, Veda,”

“You are welcome,” The computer responded.

Ashkii just enjoyed the feeling of weightlessness for a time before his curiosity got the better of him. He drifted through the seemingly endless halls of the Pyrrha for a long time – looking to see if there was any other stasis pod opened. He found none, but he knew that there were many souls here. This corridor wouldn't be the only one with sleepers. He didn't dwell on this, though; there was something else that he needed to do.

Through some trial and error, he floated along the dimly lit corridors of the ship. He eventually found his mark. Past the countless pristine stasis pods, the clean bulkheads, and holographic monitors that appeared each time he got close to something important, it was a door that caught his interest. The text at its side was simple. *Observation*. That was it. He put his hand in the holographic console next to the door. There was a moment of pause before the small door unsealed with a hiss and swung open inwards.

He had found what he was looking for, and a smile crossed his lips. It was as big a smile as any the boy had ever felt. His destination was perhaps not as glorious as some would have expected – but a small, transparent plasma field was all that separated him from space, its hull covering receding to give a view out into the wild blackness of space. There he saw stars, stretched slightly as the ship flew through space at near-impossible speeds. There were so many stars; it nearly overwhelmed him at first. In the Reverie, you could see the stars as they had been on Earth, but it was different here. Here they dotted every section of space. It was more akin to looking into a galaxy's core than what they were used to, though he saw no sign of the massive center of any such galaxy.

He just stared into that void for a time, a wanderer looking into the deep and curious as to where they were, where they were going. He stepped forward and put a hand on the bulkhead below the narrow observation window that stretched across the room. He took a breath and knew that smile had not diminished in the least. It was quiet there, and he enjoyed it.

He wanted more, though. He needed to know where they were, what they were doing. He felt that there was likely only one place to do that, though. So, he pushed off again and headed back towards the corridors. He floated along for a while until he reached a console near one of the doors. After catching the wall and swinging himself to a stop, he accessed the holographic console for a moment. He needed to find the bridge, command center, or whatever they called it in the real world.

A small wisp of light materialized near the console and floated out into the corridor in front of him. He pushed off again and followed behind the light as it showed him the path towards the command center. After a while of winding through corridors, he began to see the occasional empty stasis pod. He even passed by a couple of other teens who were out exploring, but none he passed seemed as comfortable with it as he felt. They all seemed timider than he had been, less willing to push out into the unknown. Some struggled with the lack of gravity, others sat in their beds and looked over data on holographic screens, some just seemed in shock.

Even then, they were few. Only one or two every few hundred, but Ashkii had seen thousands of beds on his journey. He couldn't help but wonder how many were, how many were still in Reverie. He had plenty of time to dwell on the thoughts, the numbers, the choices each was making. None of it stopped him or slowed him from his search for what was next.

He eventually found it; doors labeled *Command Center*. He put a hand to the control panel and expected an error, but to his surprise, the doors slid open as any had before. Then he was looking at the ship's central hub – one he had expected to be staffed by someone, something. All he found was a large empty room, a central viewscreen displaying the stars ahead of them, and many open holographic consoles. There, in a central chair raised slightly above the rest, sat a woman his age. He didn't recognize her, but she sat scanning through holographic readouts displayed by the console at the side of this chair. She turned after a moment to face him.

"Who are you?" She asked. It was straightforward, quick, but not cold or accusatory. It was just what it was.

"Ashkii," He answered without thinking, "You?"

"Larisa," She responded, spinning back around in the chair and back to the displays.

"Are you in charge?"

"I don't think anyone is in charge," Larisa responded, "When I woke up, I felt like I had to check on the others. So, here seemed right. For you, why?"

"I wanted to see where we were, where we were going."

"How many of us are there?"

"Twenty-five thousand six hundred," Larisa gave with a shake of her head. "All Orphans."

Ashkii took a breath and stepped across the command center towards the viewscreen. He stared out into space, and the conversation dwindled for a time. The silence was more of a recognition of that number than anything else. It was soon interrupted as a hologram appeared in the center of the room.

"The first two. The Sentinel and the Forerunner," The hologram was that of an old man, salt and pepper hair standing out against a pristine lab-coat. Both Ashkii and Larisa had turned to face him as he appeared unceremoniously. "I'm sure you have a thousand questions. We will get to that. Welcome to the New World. You cannot know the impossibility of you standing here right now, the impossibility that we have overcome."

"Where are we?" Ashkii asked abruptly, turning around to face the hologram.

The hologram shrugged and turned back to the young man, "I don't know. There are no points of reference."

"How long has it been since we left?" Larisa asked.

"I'm sorry," The hologram said with a smirk, "I think you misunderstand. You never left."

"Okay, that's annoyingly cryptic. Explain." Larisa twisted in her seat as the door opened, another Orphan arriving.

"I'm looking for whoever is in Command, I guess." The young woman who had just entered said quietly.

"You found them, the Forerunner," The hologram motioned to Ashkii, "And the Sentinel," He gestured to Larisa.

"We haven't agreed to anything yet, hologram," Larisa spoke quickly, a finger pointing at it in a bit of protest, "Miss, we're just like you – we don't know who is in charge or what is going on."

"Alma is the same as you. A curious mind, an engineer at heart." The hologram said with a wave towards the newcomer. "Aurelio, Nagi and Nami, Padma, Timotej, Gogi, Torill, San-"

“Veda, make him explain what he is talking about.” Ashkii shook his head as he listened.

The hologram sighed as the newcomer, Alma, moved to stand near Larisa. Veda, the virtual assistant, never responded. The hologram did, “I will tell you – once the others arrive.”

“What others? Don’t you dare say Sentinels and Forerunners, or whatever stupid titles. Tell it straight,” Larisa barked at the hologram.

“The other members of your teams.”

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