

## Chapter 02

“Of twenty-five thousand six hundred Orphans, there are two sections of the populace that are needed to protect the last stages of the project. These are the Sentinels and Forerunners. Sentinels protect and man the Pyrrha itself and ensure that the Orphans can use it as a haven until a colony is fully established. Forerunners will be tasked with scouting the new world and ensuring that it is a safe place to make a landing.” The hologram instructed the teens who had sat assembled in the command center. The first three had been joined by a handful of others, no more than twenty in total. “Those sitting here will lead those teams, with the Caretakers assigning additional persons to your teams as needed.”

“Okay... so what exactly is our mission?” One of the newcomers.

The hologram blinked. “Find and build a new world for humanity. Pyrrha’s automated systems were able to determine candidate profiles for worlds. Once you’ve returned to stasis, we’ll continue the course for a candidate world, with the assembled group training in VR until such a time as we’ve found a suitable place.”

“Okay. How much training time do we have?” Larisa asked, twisting uncomfortably in her chair.

“At current speeds between four and five cycles.” The hologram spoke with a nod, “More than enough time for bright young children to become adept with the systems and guidelines required.”

The room was silent for a few seconds until Ashkii finally spoke up. “Why stasis? We’re awake now. Wouldn’t it be better to train on the real things?”

The hologram nodded, “Yes, it would. However, Pyrrha’s energy stores are running dangerously low. The project was not expected to last this long.”

“Wait...” Alma spoke up, holding her hand up as if in some sort of a classroom. “Define dangerously low.”

“Running at current capacity, Pyrrha’s systems will begin to shut down in four cycles.” The hologram spoke, “This can be expanded by reducing non-essential systems and limiting necessary scans.”

“Four years?” One of the twins, Nagi and Nami – though it was hard to tell which – called out. “That’s not a long time.”

“Four cycles,” The hologram corrected.

“Is there a difference?” Alma asked quietly.

“No, save for cycles are the definition used by the ship due to the long absence of celestial bodies by which to maintain normal understandings of years.”

“Okay. How many cycles has the ship been running?”

“Active cycles two-hundred seventy-five thousand four hundred seventy-nine,” The hologram rattled off the number without hesitation or uncertainty – but all of those sitting there in that command center sat quietly, astonished at the number.

“The ship is nearly a quarter of a million years old?” One asked through a bit of a stutter. Ashkii glanced in his direction. The young man’s name was Aurelio, he thought, though he was not entirely sure.

“No. Inactive cycles were not included.”

“How many inactive cycles?” Larisa spoke up, taking the uncomfortable role of digging for information.

“Unknown. Active cycles were not continuous. A full active cycle is generally equivalent to idle times in between are estimated to be between five hundred thousand and six hundred thousand times the length of active periods. However, active periods have become more common since advanced probes have begun to come online and report data of possible worlds.”

Everyone sat for a second. This ship was ancient beyond ancient if the hologram wasn’t lying to them, and none of the Orphans could think of a reason it would. Still, it was impossible to believe. Ashkii glanced at Larisa, who returned the glance with a slow shake of her head. He gave her a nod, and for a moment, the two seemed to realize they were the same side of a coin. There was a reason they were the first out here.

“But we don’t have active cycles and inactive cycles, correct?” Ashkii asked. “We aren’t millions of years old.”

“Billions,” Alma corrected.

“Incorrect assumption. Upon discovery of a habitable world, the Orphan project began. Inactive cycles of organic life cannot be as long as digital systems,” The hologram took a glance around the room, “The first Orphan was created seventeen active cycles ago. Current active cycles have a ratio of about one hundred to one for organics, so what you think of as years are closer to centuries.”

“So, we’re all about 1600 years old?” Someone laughed.

“No. You are roughly sixteen years old. Your brains have been active for a roughly equivalent amount of time. Your project began roughly two millennia ago by old-world reckoning.”

“So, when we go back into stasis – we’ll keep traveling for hundreds of years, training in short bursts along the way?” Larisa said with a wave of her hand, “Correct?”

“Correct.”

“And this is safer than finding a planet nearby?”

“Very much so, yes,” The hologram spoke with a nod. “All ship’s systems are designed around the protection of the Orphan projects. If power fails or stasis becomes untenable, the nearest possible world will

be approached, and all probes recalled. If need be, we have weapon systems that can be used to terraform some planets forcibly.”

“Wait, why do we have weapons?” Aurelio stammered out from the back of the group.

“To defend ourselves,” Another answered.

“Correct.”

Larisa held out a hand and waved it at those who were talking. They did so almost instinctively as she adjusted forward to speak clearly and pointedly at the hologram, “To defend ourselves from what?”

“From the Ark.”

“What is the...”

“We’re burning energy here,” Ashkii finally spoke up and took a deep breath, “If it is safer in status, maybe we should get to that training the holo-doc is talking about,”

Larisa nodded, “I kind of agree. So I second that, all in favor,” She spoke, raising her hand slightly. A group of hands shot up, and she counted them, then added, “And all opposed,” Again, hands went up, but only a few stragglers. “Okay, the favors have it – so...” She turned back towards the hologram, “What to do we need to do to get back in stasis.”

“Veda will request all orphans to return to stasis shortly. However, Sentinel command and Forerunner command should change to stasis pods adjacent to the command center and aboard the attached vessel, Atalanta.”

“Wait, we have another ship.”

“The Pyrrha is equipped with three Forerunner vessels, enough emergency craft to evacuate the entire ship, along with nearly two hundred small range shuttles, and a myriad of other craft for use on a world’s surface. The forerunner scout ships are small, but capable of independent high-speed travel and stasis, and have their own complement of auxiliary craft for use by the small team aboard them.”

The information came as a bit of surprise, but Ashkii was quick to make use of it. “Okay, well, we should split up. How many Forerunners per ship?”

“Generally, five forerunners are assigned per attached ship, but they can house additional crew if necessary.” The hologram chimed in.

“Well, there’s me,” Ashkii spoke up first, “So, who’s with me.”

“I’m not missing this for the world,” Nagi, one of the twins, jumped up. “I’m in for Forerunners,”

“And I go where Nagi goes,” Nami stood up next to her twin brother.

There was quiet for a moment until Alma raised her hand, “You need someone who can fix things, right?”

“Right – so, four,” Ashkii said as he pushed off from the console and floated off towards the door, “Any more volunteers for Forerunner One?”

“We’ve got to find a better name than that,” Nagi spoke as he floated over towards the door to join Ashkii, flanked by his sister and Alma.

No one volunteered for a minute until Aurelio spoke up. “Atalanta...” His voice was sheepish and quiet. He pushed off of his seat and towards the others, “She was a great hunter... in myth... I... I’d like to volunteer.” He stuttered a bit, struggling to speak up.

“You sure, Rel?” One of the others spoke up, someone who knew him, it seemed.

The nervous boy nodded, “I... I’m no good with people...” He shrugged as he approached, “But... shouldn’t... be people out there, right?”

Ashkii smirked, “Right. If you can deal with the four of us – you should be set.” He turned to the hologram as he reached the door. “Larisa, I trust the Caretakers’ judgment on Two and Three. You get the Sentinels you need. And we’ll see you in Reverie.”

Reverie had once been a typical town on Earth, a college town, a peaceful city with around seventy thousand citizens. Only twenty-five thousand of those were live humans, though. For those that returned to their regular pods that day, nothing changed. Life continued as expected, though some classes and instruction altered to highlight the future need for additional professions and jobs. For those who had joined the Sentinels and the Forerunners, though, things were different. They went back into Reverie in new beds, and as they sat up in their old beds within the waiting virtual reality, they found their routines notably different.

Ashkii woke up that first day, confused. His mind had trouble connecting the dots for a moment, but his Caretakers were quick to remind him that what he experienced was real. They were the illusion – at least, their forms were. The engrams that built their systems and created their emotions were unchanged. They were the same as they ever had been – but the reality of them had shifted. It was hard for him to come to terms with this new situation. Though he had known they were virtual for most of his life, now there was a looming threat that he couldn’t quite shake.

He tried not to dwell on that, though. He got up that first morning and went about his regular business, but when he was ready, he looked out at everyone else who was going about life as they always had, but he was on a new path. He took a turn away from the usual, and it faded away. He no longer spent precious time walking to and from locations; the reality had changed. The training was more important. He would get ready in the morning, and he could spend time doing everyday things – but when he was ready, his Caretakers would send him on his way.

The first time watching the virtual world of Reverie disappear and be replaced by a replica of the Command Center was disconcerting. But he barely had time to think as everyone appeared, and the hologram they had spoken to that day in the real world appeared to instruct them. As promised, he spent the first day answering questions and catching them up. While each person had put forward their own series of questions, the general theme had been straightforward.

What happened?

Pyrrha was created in response to the Ark project – which humanity designed to preserve knowledge and information. Humankind had lost control of the Ark, and it swept across the galaxy like a plague. It devastated everything, and as much as they fought back, they could not find a way to stop it. It was not malevolent or hateful, merely driven to the preservation of knowledge. It had to know everything and to know something Ark had to break that thing down to its most essential parts. Ark had been unstoppable, and Pyrrha launched in hopes of starting over after it had won. However, Pyrrha had no information on what happened in the End – only that it happened and that this was a new galaxy.

The last bit of information sat well with none of them. Not only was the Pyrrha and the Orphans it contained ancient, but they were not from this galaxy. The way the hologram talked about the impossibility of their mission made the hairs on the back of their necks stand up collectively. They stood at a new horizon that should have been impossible, and the same ship that carried them there was unsure of how they avoided the End. For some, that fact would eat at them. They would toss and turn over what that meant for the worlds they encountered, always curious about what came before.

For Ashkii, it didn't matter. They were here now – he needed to see what was out there. His small crew agreed wholeheartedly.

Nagi was more interested in the here and the now, pushing themselves beyond whatever they thought they were and to the next point. Nami could never let her brother win, and the two together forced all of them to move ever forward. Alma seemed content to begin to understand the ship and the technology from a more intricate point of view. And Aurelio may have been curious about the end – but even he agreed that the only way to find out about it was outside of Reverie, out there in the real world.

The five of them would train for the next four cycles together. Day in and day out, they met up in that virtual Command Center. They learned together, ate together, trained together. They had a mission, and each of them believed in it. They all prepared with the others as well, but their group of five was almost always together.

Each training regimen was undeniably intensive. Most revolved around Pyrrha or Atalanta with instruction on the craft's operation, fly or run each vessel or vehicle they stored, and various emergency procedures. It was this training where Nagi had excelled. The twin had a natural affinity for flying. His eyes lit up like stars when they first got to view the Atalanta.

A virtual launch of the ship showed how it would depart from the Pyrrha. They saw the ship for the first time. Ashkii thought the Atalanta looked like a spear or arrowhead, but Nagi had immediately called it a leaf. As they watched it, he pointed out how it moved. It didn't move forward like a spear; it naturally flew

with the universe's resistance giving it a guide. It moved with the flow of space, and where gravity dipped, the ship did too. It could pivot and slide through space like a leaf caught in a breeze when it met an obstacle. It didn't need to break through like a spear because it followed space like a stream.

Of all of them, Nagi picked up flying the easiest. He could pass the Atalanta through a planet's rings without scraping the hull on ice or set her down in the only flat spot for kilometers on a planet's surface. The others could fly. But Nagi was beyond them in terms of skill and precision, and his passion for flying was unmatched in their little team.

Alma had come by her skills in engineering long before joining the team. She was a natural mechanic and a skilled craftsperson. If one provided her the tools, there was little she couldn't make. Before the end of the first year, she understood Atalanta backward and forwards, inside and out. She could tell you which power flow was fluctuating by the sound the engines made.

Nami hadn't followed her brother. When it became evident that she couldn't keep up with him in flying, she put her effort towards safety. Conflict resolution and survival seemed to come relatively naturally to her – and her scraps with her brother quickly became one-sided as she trained with the Sentinels in self-defense more and more.

Aurelio had joined with the idea that he was terrible with people – but he was only bad with socializing. He had to think about people in a scientific sense. Science seemed to be his safe spot. It didn't matter if it was hard science or philosophy. He seemed to have a knack for it. He quickly became their go-to person on all such matters, and his training began to reflect that, taking more of a medical role and supporting the others in their fields when they required a bit of scientific know-how.

Ashkii ended up training with each. They knew that he spent more time training than anyone else. He just enjoyed it. He wanted to get out there, and he wanted to make sure they succeeded – so he worked continuously at it. Every active thought Ashkii had focused on training. While he might not have matched any of the others blow for blow in their specialty, he made sure he could keep up and understand each. Someone had to take the first steps, and he was bound and determined to make it his.

For four years of their time, they trained every day. But it was day-to-day. It became routine for them. They woke up and had the Caretakers send them to the training simulation. The Sentinels and Forerunners had breakfast with the entirety of the group. There were always jokes about the purpose of eating in the simulation, but it wasn't something anyone hated doing. There was nothing to make them suspect that this day would be the last, how different it would be, that all that training was coming to a head all at once.