Chapter 03

The morning breakfast had begun as it always had that day. The virtual smell of warm food tickled at the senses. A militaristic, if pristine, cafeteria had materialized for them to meet and enjoy company with one another for a time. The usual groups had slid off into their standard niches, and for a minute when Ashkii arrived, he found himself happy to stand by and watch. For four years, give or take, this had been his routine. He did a little early training and came to breakfast. He'd usually stand off to one side for a minute before joining his team. Many days, like today, it gave him a chance to catch up with his counterpart in the Sentinels.

"Another day down, Ashkii," Larisa had said to him as she approached. "Veda says we're getting close, only a few more… well, days…" She waved her hand about the room, signaling the fleeting idea of time in this place, "until we're at the new world."

"Any more data from the probes?" Ashkii asked with a sideways glance to the Sentinel.

Larisa shook her head. "No. Veda says they sent their last data packets roughly two-hundred years ago local time. They had detected actual habitability, a stable climate, but they hadn't gotten close enough to give us any views of the planet. It's Earth-like, for sure, but it's like the probes never woke up from their last idle sections."

"Maybe they ran out of power? Like Pyrrha is?" Ashkii asked quickly.

"Timotej," Larisa mentioned her top scientist, "Says that's impossible. Veda agrees."

"But we don't have another choice. This is the one."

"Has to be. We're light-years away from another candidate world. As long as there is fissionable material, we should at least be able to start the process of restoring power to Pyrrha's stores."

"Hm," Ashkii huffed, "Well, I guess Forerunners need to be ready to launch as soon as we're in the system, right?"

"Right."

"I'll check in with the other teams, and we'll be ready," Ashkii said quietly, with a bit of a nod. "I'm going to grab breakfast with my team – you're welcome to join us."

"Thanks, but I've got work to do, maybe next time?"

"Sure."

The conversation ended there. Ashkii stepped away into the cafeteria and moved through the crowds with a few kind words here and there to other crewmen as he passed. He stopped by two different tables to connect with the other Forerunner captains, Soheil and Rozarie – leaders of the Fuxi and Wilde Jagd,

respectively. Their teams, like Ashkii's, were volunteers. In total, there were sixteen Forerunners, with the Wilde Jagd taking on an extra member from the pool of eleven that had been left after Ashkii assembled his team. He let them know that it'd only be a couple of days until the Forerunners were taking off if the numbers Veda had were correct. They would be ready.

He didn't linger too long with the other teams, leaving them to their breakfast and moving to join his team. As he approached, the twins were fighting over something he couldn't make out. A muffin, maybe. Nagi had climbed up to try to grab it out of Nami's hands, but she was ducking and dodging out of the way – keeping it just out of reach. When he finally got close to grabbing it, she quickly licked the side of the pastry, and her brother gave up, slumping back into his seat. Ashkii got close enough to hear the conversation.

"I don't understand…" Aurelio spoke quietly, "It's a hologram. Your germs aren't really going to infect your brother with anything."

"It's still gross," Nagi argued, "And I've gotten sick before. How do we get sick if it's a hologram?"

"The system introduces known diseases to the immune system to make sure it doesn't fail upon transition out of stasis. Reverie lets us understand how to react when the sickness occurs. Soup, rest. That kind of thing," The scientist spoke, his stutter still causing him to stumble through some words, but he had grown more comfortable and confident around the crew.

"Good morning, Ashkii," Alma said without looking up from the holographic data displayed next to her as she ate.

Nami may have said good morning too, but it was impossible to tell given the mouthful of muffin she was currently enjoying.

"Good morning, everyone. News from Larisa," Ashkii said as he pulled a seat out from the table. He leaned forward with his elbows on the table and gave a glance across them, "Probably four Reverie days until we're at the new world. So, we'll probably be leaving before long."

"Freaking finally," Nagi leaned back and stretched, "Real flying, real exploring. No more simulations."

"But… real danger…" Aurelio added with his stutter coming back somewhat quickly at the idea of being out there.

"We've survived thousands of years out here in space. We can explore a planet," Alma said with a smirk.

"I want to do a dry run, just in case," Ashkii adjusted and glanced over to Nami, "So, skip training with the Sentinels this morning. We'll do a full launch, survey, landing, the works. Prove we can do it today and have time to work on any trouble spots," He glanced around, "Sound good?"

"I like it," Nami spoke up first, seemingly happy to not spend the morning with another team.

The rest of the team all nodded or agreed in one way or another. It was a simple thing, but one they all knew was a turning point. "After a long breakfast?" Nagi finally asked, breaking the somewhat silent aftermath.

"Sure, after a long breakfast," Ashkii added. He nodded towards a plate of muffins in the center of the table, "Pass me one of those."

The training was nothing special for them, but that day felt distinctly different. Everything seemed more important to get right. Ashkii watched as the crew worked through the general tasks – checking inventory and ensuring everything was in its place. They went through the motions, launching from the Pyrrha, general flying, surface scans and details, landing, equipment, and communication checks. It all came naturally.

For hours they worked at it, well into the evening as they went over every little thing they might need to in a real launch. Then the day came to an end. They were all tired, ready to shut down for a bit and rest up before the next day and the ever-closer motion towards the goal of a new world. At the end of the day, they decided to go back to the cafeteria. One more meal before rest and they chatted along the way.

"I don't see why Forerunners don't get defense drones like Sentinels do. We land the ship, and there is something there to protect it while we're out scanning. Right now, nothing," Nami raised her hands, "It just sits out in the open."

"Well, I mean, who is going to steal the ship?" Alma spoke with a shrug, dusting her hands against her shirt and cleaning off some holographic gunk from the days training.

"It's not about it being stolen. It's about other stuff – angry animals,"

"Like what, some sort of pissed off rhino knocking the ship over?" Nagi laughed, "We don't need defense drones."

"I'm just saying, better to have them and not need them…"

Nami was cut off as there seemed to be a little bit of stagger in the program. For a moment, even just the most split of seconds, Reverie's virtual world had faded to black and then returned to normal. It set all of them on edge immediately, no better shown off than with Nagi's general irreverence.

"Did Reverie just blink, or did I have a stroke?"

"I think Reverie blinked…" Alma said with a little breath. "Has that ever happened before?"

"No, never," Aurelio answered without hesitation. "We should hurry to see if it was just us or the others."

"Right, agreed," Ashkii added as the five began to move with a much more urgency down the corridor. It took no time until they were back in the cafeteria.

There, they found a few groups of crewmen as confused as they were. It was an unusual occurrence, but people were trying to remain calm for the most part. As Ashkii stepped through the entrance, he and his team quickly approached the other Forerunners.

"Ashkii, did you guys see the blink?" Sohail spoke with a little quickness in his voice.

"Yeah. Everyone okay here?" Ashkii responded.

"Forerunners are fine. Sentinels seem spooked, though," Rozarie added as she motioned out to the crowd. Those who seemed a bit more concerned were Sentinels, though their leadership was attempting to set things right, calm minds, and put everyone at ease. Even a glance showed one distinct personality missing.

"Where's Larisa?" Ashkii asked as he pushed past the other two captains, moving towards the exacerbated scientist Timotej.

The young man turned as Ashkii approached, "Oh, finally, someone with some authority. Any idea what is going on?"

"I hoped you knew," Ashkii said quickly, turning away from the majority of the crowd and motioning Timotej over to join the Forerunners. "Where's Larisa?"

"No one knows," Timotej admitted. "She had headed back to rest before the blink. I haven't seen her since."

"Veda, where is Larisa?" Rozarie asked. Then there was a long pause, the deafening silence of an answer not given by the computer. "Veda?" The Forerunner captain tried again. Nothing.

"That's not good," Sahail whispered.

"How could the…" Timotej seemed to lose himself in thought as the others glanced at the scientist. "I don't know how Veda would even shut down or stop responding while Reverie was active." He admitted with a shrug. "It seems impossible…"

"There should be failsafe measures that activate, in that case, right?" Ashkii asked as he ran a finger along the bridge of his nose.

Timotej shrugged, "It seems impossible…"

"You said that Tim, what…"

"Uh… Captains," One of the Forerunners called out.

Timotej shrugged and repeated himself as the three captains turned towards the crowd. All the Sentinels were repeating their actions. Everyone except the Forerunners seemed to be stuck in a loop.

"Ideas?" Ashkii asked quickly.

Something's… disconnected Reverie… Forerunners are on a different… server… but each ship is separate…" Aurelio conjectured, squinting and looking away from the group as he formulated his thoughts, pauses punctuating every few words as he fought back against his nerves.

"So, we're next," Sahail spoke.

"Right," Ashkii quickly turned towards them. "Priorities. Protect Pyrrha, find the other Forerunners, figure this out after – got it?"

"Understood," Both responded as the Sentinels disappeared, and the room started to go dark.

"Stay safe, stick together, and we'll meet back up as soon as we can," Ashkii said as he looked to the two other Captains. They didn't respond; they just stared for a moment before their digital forms blinked out of existence. The remaining Captain was quick to spin around to look for his crew, and there they all stood. "Still with me?"

"Always Captain," Nami said as she herded the others over to Ashkii.

"This is really bad," Alma said as Aurelio nodded in quick agreement.

"Probably,"

"Attention," Veda's voice returned. "Damage detected – Reverie systems isolated for the protection of crew in stasis."

"Veda, what the hell is going on?" Ashkii asked.

"Multiple impacts detected, unknown source. Pyrrha systems were damaged. Ship status unknown. Emergency launch of Forerunner ships underway."

"What?" Nagi sputtered. "How are we launching without a pilot?"

"Emergency launch is more of an ejection than anything," Alma added quickly, "Which is not good if there are impacts on the main ship."

"We need to wake up," Ashkii barked, "Veda… wake us up."

"Stasis systems shutting down. Reverie participants are being acclimated." The computerized voice droned without emotion.

"No, we need it much faster – do an emergency wake up," Ashkii ordered.

"Unable to comply," Veda responded. "Emergency procedures are underway."

"What, how? By who?"

There was a pause as Ashkii glanced around with the realization that there were only four of them. Their pilot was missing.