

Chapter 09

The name Deucalion was instantly recognizable to the Forerunners. He was the husband of Pyrrha, the father of the new humans born after Pandora. It was a story they were all told a child, held up as the reason for the names they took. Throughout all the times they had heard the tale, learning about Pyrrha the ship, all their training – not once had the name Deucalion been brought up. Nor had there ever been any discussion of the possibility of another ship. Throughout every year, every waking moment, it had been explained to them that they were the only ones.

Now, a blinking blue starburst blew that entire mythos out of the water. The Forerunners no longer had that to look to for stability. At that moment, there was a series of complex emotions that ran counter to one another. On the one hand, it was warming to know that there were others here. There were more humans. They were not the last, and their family had just grown exponentially. The sinking feeling that they had been lied to, though, bubbled under the surface. The question itself was gnawing at each of them.

Why? Why not admit there was at least one other ship? Why hide that fact from the very people you were sending out to explore?

There were answers. Each person went through their selection of ideas without ever speaking a word of it. It could have been to keep them driven. As the last, they could not fail. It could be to keep them from falsely searching an infinite void for others. It could have been that Pyrrha was first, and Deucalion didn't exist when she was launched. Or, maybe, the truth of their journey was never really said to them.

The last thought seemed universal among them. Something had not been told to the Orphans. This new fact was evident to them now more than ever. They all agreed on one thing, though. There was no reason to stay here and hold off. Now, they had a map, they had a place they could find answers, and that was going to be their goal. They would travel to Deucalion. The answers would be there – though. They worried that the Ark energy detected could also be there. Still, they needed to find out. Their ancestors had fought the Ark project and lost, but it should not have existed any longer.

With that goal in mind, the team silently finished suiting up. The Forerunners packed up what they could carry, what the lift could haul, and for the rest of what they couldn't bring, they hid as best they could or destroyed. They wouldn't leave weapons for the riders to find or anything similar. Once they were satisfied, they began their trek as the suns reached high in the sky. They had decided to follow Nami's instincts and move toward whatever it was that the animals knew was beyond their sight. While their map may have marked some settlements, it was only the largest of them – and there were none too close. If they could find the river, they could follow it for some ways in hopes of finding a better lay of the land.

The trek was long and quiet, as most journeys were. They did not have a lot to talk about that outweighed their thoughts. When the conversation came up, it tended to be about the journey itself or less serious. It was a good change from the more critical conversations that had held them the past few days.

While sparse, it was refreshing to hear pointless conversations of crew members arguing over what they should call various grass or tree species or the accurate description of some of the alien wildlife.

The first night in the wilds was uncomfortable. They had underestimated the speed at which it got cold and had not built camp quick enough. They spent much of that first night warming back up from that mistake. It was a mistake they wouldn't make again. The next couple of nights were more comfortable. They set up camp before dark and had fires ready as the temperature began to drop. They had advanced equipment, but the basics of setting up a camp remained the same. Clear an area, set up tents, and get a fire going.

Despite having equipment designed to keep them safe in any season or weather, there was still a lot of work in making sure that they were properly set up each night. So, they adjusted to make sure they had that time. They kept the two tents connected with the lift nearby with supplies. For the colder nights, they could set up a small fire inside if they needed to, thanks to their cooking gear – but they had been able to avoid that for the most part.

After the third day, they found the river they had suspected to exist. They followed it downstream for some time, cataloging the animals of this world as they went. For the most part, it seemed that much of the world was populated by smaller animals. They saw many bird species – almost all seemed to be in the early evolution of birds and still held some of their more saurian traits. Each was more primal than the birds they had been used to, earlier in their evolutionary tree and struggling to make a place for themselves.

Most of the mammals they had seen were smaller—rodents and ground-dwelling beasts that scurried from one point of safety to the next. The only thing that broke that habit was a larger predator they saw watching them in the distance in the morning. It was the size of a small bear but looked more akin to a fox in body shape. Long attentive ears and a powerful tail kept it balanced as it bounded across the steppe – and it had no interest in going after unfamiliar prey.

Of course, they did see some wild versions of the mounts they had seen the riders use. Large horse-like lizards that ran freely in this place and visited the river for drinks. They were completely unafraid of the travelers, perfectly content to walk near them and drink as they passed by. Likely, this helped in their domestication.

On the fourth day, though, they saw something that gave them hope that they were getting close; herding animals. They were more akin to goats than most anything else, with more horns and spikes along their spines. They looked painful to the crew, but the creatures had dense fur and numbers. They could see the watchful shepherds in the distance, but by the time they had noticed them – the locals had opted to call their herds and start to move away. It was clear that travelers might not have been fully trusted in the area.

That fourth night they saw lights on the horizon, the flickering fires of a city or a village in the distance. Had they been able to travel a few more hours, they might have reached the location, but there was no risking the nighttime journey in this sort of weather. It was better to wait until morning and wait they did.

As soon as the sun rose and the temperature began to bounce back, they broke down camp and headed towards the distant settlement they had spotted the night before. There was a palpable excitement in the group at finding a town. This village would be their first real view of the society, of the people of this new world. They moved a bit quicker than usual, a bit more excited.

As they passed through the region, they saw some signs of small farms along the river banks. They were not large, not significant settlements like one would find in more fertile valleys. Here in this steppe, it was clear that there were not many arable lands, and what was there was used to the best of the people's abilities. The crew could not identify the food that was being grown in any of them. Without stealing some to check, they couldn't know – but based on the density of the crops, they assumed most of it was a starch or staple like wheat or rice. Each farm seemed to have a single small home somewhere on the property. All looked like remote yurts, built up with hide and limited stone or wood for support, with outbuildings and storage tending to be built with packed clay. Given the limited trees and stone, that was something they expected.

Around noonday, they got their first good view of the community. It seemed that here had been where much of the local wood had been used. The small settlement was built on the river banks, a half-circle of wooden palisade walls stretching across its width. Within those spiked walls were more yurt-like buildings. It raised the question of whether it was a permanent settlement or sometimes moved up and down the river or even further out into the fields.

It was clear that the village itself was a bit of an oddity in the region. The people here were likely primarily nomadic, but with some few settlements dotting the land, trying to carve out a stable place. It was impossible to know how challenging that would be in a place like this – but a sturdy crop that could throw off the cold nights here was impressive in and of itself, and those who had built a home here had done so against the odds. It was an admirable thing in the minds of the Forerunners, but they worried about who they would meet and how they would respond to the outsiders. Their reception so far had been poor, and this place was going to be no different, they thought. Even if they sought traders, there was going to be suspicion around the Orphans.

That last part of their journey was by far the longest. Those few hundred meters found them on a small path. It was not well-traveled, but there were a few signs of carts along the road. Small trenches were dug by wheeled carts and their beasts of burden. The ground was cold and dry, though, broken up and rocky. Whatever they did to create life in this place, to grow any sustainable food source was undoubtedly a challenge. There was some curiosity among the Forerunners on the techniques used.

They slowed their approach as the walls came into better view. The palisades had simple gates shut tight. The walls were there to delay enemies, but they would not hold back any real sort of military – but they would buy time against raiders. Outside that gate was a couple of figures. As the small group approached, it became evident; they were guards, dressed in thick hide armor with spears and swords. They were neither the antler creatures nor the raptors, though.

These individuals were human – or, relatively near human – something that surprised the group of Forerunners. Aside from some small differences, they appeared almost identical to the newcomers. Their

ears were more pointed, their eyes a bit wider, and their general builds just a bit slimmer, but they were undeniably human.

"I suppose that answers our question on whether or not they have human DNA," Alma spoke up first as the group came to a stop before reaching the gate.

The two guards adjusted uncomfortably as they looked upon the alien and strangely clad Forerunners. One called out something, but none of the group was able to make it out.

Aurelio nodded towards them, "I guess one of us should talk to them. Any ideas?" He spoke, glancing over towards Ashkii.

The captain took a breath. "Nope. No idea if their gestures are the same as ours even. I guess I'll give it a shot," He swallowed his nerves and adjusted his jacket with a single hard tug, and started forward. Nami stepped up behind him and kept a few feet back, but he didn't protest her company. After all, if spears were going to start flying, he'd rather have her there. As he got close enough for the guards to hear him, he called out, "Hello! You don't happen to speak our language, do you?"

There was some silence for a moment until one guard seemed to adjust and lower his spear a bit. He didn't call back in a language that Ashkii understood – but the word and tone used were clear. "Orfan?"

"Yes, I think," Ashkii said, motioning back towards his crew and then twisting to point towards the Pyrrha emblem, "We're Orphans – from Pyrrha." He glanced back to Nami, "What did they call us?"

"Orfan – Arkantor, I think," Nami corrected herself after realizing what he was asking.

"Arkantor?" Ashkii called out.

One of the guardsmen turned and smacked his fist against the palisade gate. He then held out a hand to keep them from moving forward. Ashkii and Nami complied and watched the surroundings. It was clear that there was some distrust here, and rightly so. After all, they were aliens that didn't speak the language of the people they were approaching. In his mind, Ashkii knew it was worrying that they seemed to be aware of their emblem and name. It haunted him during the time they were forced to wait. For nearly ten minutes, he waited and went through all the possibilities.

His thoughts were broken when Nami punched the back of his shoulder lightly, the Palisade gates opening slowly to reveal an older man. He was bearded, his hair white with age. He had many wrinkles and marks of age but seemed to be in decent health despite his elder status. He approached with a couple of new guardsmen, better armed and equipped, who had come with him from the town. His approach was hesitant, a look of wonder across his face as a broad smile crossed his lips.

"I never imagined this day," He called out as he stepped forward and paused. He and his guards bowed to the two. The action drew an instinctive bow in return from Nami and Ashkii. When they raised, he clapped his hands together. "Orfans visiting our quaint town. You do us a great honor," He said before waving his hands towards the gates, "Please, come. Our home is open to you."

"Thank you," Ashkii spoke as he raised his hand. "As much as we would love to sample your hospitality, to know you..." He glanced to Nami, who let out a long sigh and shook her head. She knew what he was about to do, "... it would be dishonest of us to take advantage of your offer."

"Nonsense," The man spoke with a laugh, "We are happy to serve."

"We are not from this world," Ashkii spoke bluntly, motioning up and towards the path their ship would have taken, "And we seek answers. What we expected when we..."

The older man's tone changed rapidly. "And they shall come from the stars..." He stepped back, and his guards put themselves between him and the Forerunners, "Your honesty is unexpected for enemies of the Spire."

"We don't even know what the Spire is," Nami protested, throwing her hands up into the air.

"We are a small village, unimportant, and our strategic value is limited. Please, leave us in peace," The old man requested.

"We aren't going to hurt you. We don't intend to bring harm to your village or any other village; we just need answers," Ashkii was flustered for a moment.

"Leave us in peace," The man spoke, "We have no quarrel with you."

Ashkii shook his head, "Fine. At least point us to the next town?"

The man shook his head and refused. They offered no more words to the Forerunners, backing away and going back within their walls. Even the first two guards followed back, and they shut the gate to the outsiders.

"So, now what?" Nami asked, "Want me to kick down the door and force questions out of them?"

"What? No. We're..." Ashkii sighed, "You were joking."

"Clearly."

"One thing is clear, right?"

"That someone at this Spire has warned the populace against us – or people like us," Nami spoke as the two turned and headed back to the others.

"Right, and if they warned others against us, they expected us," Ashkii said quietly, "So, did they expect Deucalion or did they find out about Pyrrha from Deucalion?"

"Or is Deucalion the one giving the warnings?" Nami added another option.

"I suppose it's time to change our plan," Ashkii spoke as they reached the rest of their team. "We need to find our way to this Spire and get answers. So, do we head to the Mountains or the Coast?"

