

## Chapter 10

The Forerunners had left the village shortly after being turned away. They knew that south to the mountains would cause them to need to cross the range itself – something challenging even in the best of situations. Heading east towards the sea would require them to find passage on a ship or endure a long journey down a populated and possibly unfriendly coast. The realization that either would be a challenge had soured their respective moods, and some ways out of the village, around their camp that night, they sat in contemplative silence. They had time to decide, but for the first night at least, they took the time to mourn the hope that this would be a friendly place.

The night was cold, clouds covering the naturally beautiful sky and painting the landscape in the inky darkness. It made it a bit warmer, though this was relative and didn't provide so much warmth. It was more of a relief from the traditionally brutal cold of each evening. The five had a small meal of warmed rations and planned on calling it a quiet and quick end to the night. The morning and early travel couldn't come early enough for them.

The silence was broken before they fell asleep, though. While the Forerunners were finishing up for the night, putting out fires and settling into tents for the night, Nagi – who wasn't able to help still – spoke up, having spotted something. "Hey, guys, figures in the dark." He said swiftly, nodding towards the distance.

The forerunners weren't going to wait for whatever it was to show themselves. When Nagi spoke, they jumped into action. Ashkii ignited a flare in his palm, throwing it into the sky towards the figures. Both Rel and Alma followed suit, lighting up the camp with their own – and Nami prepared herself to defend them if needed.

The quick display of neoterics caused the figures to stop in their tracks. There were only two of them, the light showed. One seemed familiar, but the other was a young woman that none of them recognized. Both were dressed in hiding armors and equipped with weapons and backpacks. They appeared to ready for a conflict but held up their hands when spotted. The woman came forward a step with a soft but stern voice, "We mean no harm," She called out without much more warning.

"Then why do you approach at night?" Nami barked at the figures.

"Because we could not be seen by the people of the village – for our safety and yours," The visitor called back.

The Forerunners held their ground and silently looked to one another, and all eventually to Ashkii. The Captain wasn't too sure what to make of the situation. He didn't know if he could trust them. But, he was willing to give them a chance. He gave a call out and took a closer look across them as they answered, "Explain yourselves."

He watched as the woman cleared her throat. She was one of the more human of the species. Her hair was cut short, not hanging low out of her cloak. It may have been pulled up, but the strands did not look tugged back – more hastily cut from what he could see. "I heard rumors from scavengers that Orfans had been seen in the Steppe. When the rumor found me that you were outside the town, I went to investigate, to find the townsman had sent you away for some unfounded fear of an old legend."

"Why would you seek us out?" Nami asked bluntly.

"Because I have questions only the Orfan can answer," She spoke calmly.

"And him?" The security officer pointed a mist-covered hand towards the man who hadn't spoken. She had a moment of realization, "The village guard from earlier."

"My..." She turned towards him, "A partner," There was evident hesitation in her voice, a sign that she wasn't speaking the truth. It was something that did not escape the Forerunners.

"You need to be honest, or this isn't going to work," Ashkii spoke with a single nod. "We can't trust you if you lie to us at our first meeting."

The woman seemed unhappy, shrinking away for a moment before nodding. "Fair," She spoke, lowering her hands slightly. "I needed help getting out of the city unseen, and he was interested," She paused, "In me."

"You led him on?" Nami scoffed.

"No, I gave in," She spat back.

"That might be worse," Alma chimed in with a bit of a laugh, "But it is honest at least."

"We're not here to judge the woman on her relationships," Ashkii spoke quietly before turning to her. "We likely don't have the answers you seek. We're new here, and we don't know anything about this world. You may be risking a lot,"

"I have very little to risk," She admitted. "And I'll take what I can get. I've been looking for free Orfans for as long as I can remember."

"Well, then, we can likely come to some sort of an agreement," Ashkii spoke, "We can answer what we know if you can help us find answers for what we need." He said with another point to the guard, "Does he speak any of our language?"

"No, not a word," She said softly, "I haven't had a chance to teach him anything, and even if I did, he could not learn the language of the Orfan."

"Anyone can learn if taught," Aurelio offered. "If you can teach your language, we can begin to teach others ours."

"I thought the language of the Orfan was only accessible with the Mists," The woman replied.

"It's a language – just like any other. You don't need anything special to speak it," Aurelio explained, "We believe the use of the Mist was probably just a shortcut to learning – or, I do. I haven't been able to make much in the way of advances in studying the exact reasons behind the act."

"It's our understanding that only Arkantor can have the Mist and speak the language," Ashkii added.

"That is what we are told," The woman spoke with a nod.

Nami took a deep breath and shook her head, "We have no reason to trust you," She said, lowering her guard slightly.

"So, Nami will be watching you," Ashkii added, "But, we're having little luck in getting answers from others, so – we'll take the risk." He spoke, closing his fist. As his fingers curled into his palm, the flare of light above them burst into a gray mist. The other two lights followed suit when doused from a distance by their casters. The group was back in the darkness, "Alma, light another fire."

"On it," She said with a snap of her fingers, sparks flying from between her thumb and forefinger.

"Nami, Nagi," Ashkii spoke, "You two watch them,"

"Very funny, boss," Nagi joked at him. There was little else he could do still.

"Rel, you and I will do most of the talking,"

"Well... you... will do the talking... I'll..." Rel protested a bit.

"You'll do fine once the science stuff starts," Nagi added calmly from his comfortable place against one of the crates of the lift and a warm smile.

"Right," Ashkii spoke, "I guess introductions are in order. I'm Ashkii," He said, putting a hand on his chest, "This is Nami, Nagi, Alma, and Aurelio," He pointed to each in turn, "Though we call him Rel," He added at the end before looking to their unexpected guests. "We're Forerunners – what you'd likely call Scouts. We're from a ship known as the Pyrrha."

"A ship?" The woman asked, "The Orfan are from over the seas?"

"No," Ashkii spoke with a nod, "We're from..." He paused for a moment and shook his head, "We're from space. A falling star about a week ago was our ship."

"Oh," She spoke with a bit of worry, "I suppose that is why the legends fit so well and frighten the others so much..." She shook her head. It was clear that she was shaking off the same hesitation and fear as the others they had met faced, but she had a goal of some sort. Something that she needed to know from them that was worth the risk, it seemed. She moved forward with a timid step and an audible breath, "So, you came from fires in the sky," She paused, "Would you tell me if you were demons sent to destroy us? Everything we've built and known?"

"How do we even begin to answer that?" Nami laughed.

“We’re orphans – orphans of a world long dead. We’re just seeking a new place to make our home. We did not intend to come to a world that was populated, and we have no desire to disturb your traditions or your ways of life. We crashed, and we should not be here. Our ship, the Pyrrha, is still out there – and we hope to contact it and find a more suitable world,” Ashkii spoke, holding a hand out toward the others. “We just need to find a way to contact them. All we can offer is the truth, as unrealistic as it may sound.”

The visitor woman took a deep breath and looked to her partner, who had stood quietly – if nervously – to her side throughout. He didn’t say a word and just shrugged at her. She finally gave a nod, “I don’t see why you would be lying. If you had wanted, you could have taken our guards or used your magic to get your way at town...”

“Neoterics,” Rel corrected.

“What?”

“You referred to our nanites as magic. They’re not. They’re neoterics,” Rel stuttered a bit during the correction but mostly just spoke quickly to try to keep from doing just that.

“I don’t understand,”

“It’s not magic, its technology,” Ashkii added, with a shake of his head, “Obscenely advanced technology compared to where your people are – but it isn’t magic. Rel is just pedantic about it. It might as well be magic to you and your people.”

“That sounds a little rude, Ashkii,” Alma said as the fire jumped to life. “They can use neoterics; apparently, they just don’t understand how they work.”

“Right, anyway,” Ashkii said, “Your names?”

“Etia,” The visitor motioned to herself, then to her partner, “And Jagon,” She paused for a moment before adding, “He likes to think of himself as a professional guardsman but does a lot of little things around town since guarding isn’t really a job.”

“And you?”

“I’m... an apprentice arkantor, I suppose?” She seemed unsure.

“Well, it’s not a lie, but it is an omission,” Nami growled a bit, “Not helping your cause,”

“Fine. A failed arkantor apprentice, and... runaway,” Etia spoke quietly and shook her head. “I’d rather not get into the grosser details.”

Ashkii cut off Nami before she could say anything else, “That’s fair,” He spoke, “We don’t need to know your personal information, to be sure. You don’t have to detail any of that unless you want to do so.”

“Thank you,”

“How did you fail as an Arkantor?” Rel asked bluntly.

“Oh, straight to questions?” Etia smirked as she shook her head, “Still going to leave me standing out in the cold and dark while we talk?”

Ashkii waved her forward, only to have Nami step forward between them and throw out her hand to point to the ground in front of her, “Weapons here. None are going past me – not even survival knives,”

Etia nodded, “Jagon, val sorca toar,”

The guard, Jagon, nodded in return, “Hasa, Etia.” He was hesitant but then tossed his spear down to the ground in front of the Forerunner, then a short sword and dagger. Etia followed suit, throwing her short blade and detaching a small quiver of bolts from her belt, then put them on the small pile of archaic weapons.

Nami took a step to the side and motioned the two through to their camp. There was a moment where they stepped forward and carefully looked at the Orphans, as curious about them as they were of the locals. It was a moment of connection that wasn’t common in any situation, but there was something especially troubling in this one. The similarities between the two species were incredible.

In the dim light, the differences were apparent. They were smaller than humans. Their ears tapered to a leaf-like point. Their eyes were larger than humans – but otherwise, they appeared much the same. As they joined the Forerunners around the fire, they seemed to have the same realizations, the same connections. Both groups stared at one another for a short time before finally, someone broke the silence.

“Fascinating,” Rel whispered. “May I get a better look at you?” He asked Etia.

She gave an unsure shrug, “I suppose. You really haven’t seen us before?”

As she asked, Rel stepped around the fire and held out a hand. He stopped a few centimeters short of her, a soft mist escaping his hand and drifting around to her. She let out a little startled noise, but his other hand raised, “Don’t be afraid – they’re just making notes. You won’t be harmed.”

“They?” She asked.

Ashkii answered that question, “Nanites. What you call the Mist, our Neoterics is based on Nanites. These are microscopic robots that follow our mental commands.”

“I don’t understand,” She admitted.

“We built tiny creatures, the size of grains of sand or smaller. They do all the work and just listen to our commands. They’re as much a part of us as our blood,” Nagi clarified with a smirk, “It took me a while to understand it too.”

“So, they are alive?” She asked.

“No,” Rel laughed, “Not in the way you think of life, at least.”

“They’re more akin to tools than anything,” Ashkii spoke, “But they do have qualities of life. They reproduce on their own, for instance.”

“Etia,” Rel asked, “You said you had neoterics?”

She nodded, “Yes, my family has the ability to use the Mists.”

“Can you put your hand over mine?” He asked, twisting his hand palm up, “And concentrate... on...”

“Oh, I see what you’re doing Rel, want me to tell her?” Nagi asked from his seat, twisting his head towards her.

Rel nodded.

“Okay, Etia,” Nagi spoke with a flicker of movement in his hands. “Put your hand over Rel’s, palm to palm. You don’t actually have to touch him if you don’t want to,” He said with a nod towards the medic’s hand.

“Okay,” She said as she moved her hand over Rel’s. Her fingers curled closed over the medic’s for a moment as she hesitated. “What is he doing?”

“Rel is our Medic. If your neoterics are keyed like ours, he’ll be able to communicate with yours, and they can give him a view of your vitals. He can check your health and get an idea of how you are. And, it’ll let him see get a knowledge of how you look on the inside, which is useful in helping cure anything that might come up.” Nagi spoke.

“Would you have ever expected Nagi’s inability to understand anything expressed in big words would have actually come in handy?” Nami laughed.

“Shut up,” Nagi snapped back.

Etia opened her hand and took a breath. “Okay...”

“Concentrate on calm. Go to your happy place and actively think about allowing the medic to check on you,” Nagi finished.

The visitor nodded. It took a few seconds, but after a moment, her mists escaped her palm, twisting around those of the medic and creating a small stream. After a moment, there was a slight glow to them, and she seemed startled. “Wait, I’m using my Mist?”

“Mhm,” Rel nodded as he smiled over to her, “You’re doing perfectly. Just keep concentrating for a few more seconds.”

She nodded a couple of times and glanced to Jagon, who seemed as astonished as her, even a bit defensive – but since she wasn’t protesting, he let it happen.

After a few moments, Rel seemed satisfied and closed his palm. He smiled at her and spoke, "That's it."

"We're done?"

"Yes," Rel said, "You seem healthy – I'll go over the data and let you know officially,"

"They don't just tell you?"

Ashkii took that question, "No, they just give us data. Rel will have to go over it. Don't worry. It won't take too long."

"But, our healers... I've watched them stitch wounds and cure illness," Etia responded.

"They likely know what is wrong from talking to you or seeing it. We don't. But, Rel will understand more soon," Ashkii waved towards her, "Now, you said you had a question for the Orphans? Go ahead and ask. We've got one of our questions answered."

She nodded a little bit, "Well that made my questions more complicated," She admitted, "I was going to ask why I was given the mists if I can't use them, but now..." She said with a shake of her head. "Now, I don't know."

"Well, that might be hard for us to answer, obviously," Ashkii shrugged, "But you can use your Mists. We just have to find out what kind of mists you have, and then we can teach you," He motioned back, "Each of us has a different style of Neoterics. Nami is a Sentinel, for instance," He spoke with a nod, "Her abilities are about defense and offense. Rel is what you would call a healer, though he's really more of a scientist. His nanites can tell him a lot about the world. Alma's our engineer, a craftsperson. So, she can build and create. Nagi is our pilot and has speed and perceptive abilities enhanced. And I'm sort of in command, which,"

"Captain," Rel interrupted. "Her nanites don't correspond to any one of our disciplines," He suggested.

"Something different, or one of the colonist branches?" Nami asked.

"Neither, both," The medic said quietly, "They're unwritten, unprogrammed. Baseline. Like those we have in stasis."

"That explains why she can't use them. Etia, where do you learn to use the Mists in this world?"

"The Spire," She responded quietly, "But I couldn't cut it and have been on my own since."

"Everything leads back to the Spire, doesn't it?" Alma poked at the fire.

"If we offered to help teach you, would you be willing to guide us to the Spire?" Ashkii asked bluntly.