

Chapter 11

Etia had wholeheartedly agreed to help the Forerunners get to the Spire in exchange for assistance in learning her powers. While they were still unsure about her and her partner, they needed the help. Likewise, she seemed to be desperate for theirs. She was the first and so far only person who seemed willing to treat them with anything other than suspicion or fear. It was clear from their short interactions that she could not learn to use neoterics in the usual way for this world – whatever that may have been. She wasn't willing to explain it just yet to them, it seemed.

There was no sign of duplicitousness in her earlier actions, excepting the unwillingness to speak on her personal matters, which they couldn't complain about too much. She had a right to her privacy, though her reluctance to open up did keep Nami on edge. The security officer's eyes never moved far from the visitor. She didn't need to push her, but she wouldn't trust her until there had been something to prove she was trustworthy.

From their short conversation, the Forerunners brought the visitors into their camp. At the same time, they did not have any extra tents or anything to shelter them. The two locals had brought their own tent – though it was primitive and unimpressive. It was barely a fur-lined lean-to put up near the fire and bedrolls placed close together under fur blankets. The two visitors conversed a bit in their language under their makeshift tent.

The Forerunners let them to their own devices for a time. They had their planning to do now. While Nami and Nagi were tasked with keeping eyes on the newcomers, the others had more complex tasks to tend to for the time being. Aurelio was deep in the data he had gathered from the visitor, charting out the information as best he could to understand her physiology better. The differences and similarities enthralled him. It was going to be impossible to pry him away from the data after he got too deep. There was some worry that they might not be able to do anything to get him back from the scans for a long while. Then there was Alma and Ashkii.

They took the time to plan a bit, going over their supplies to see what they could use to extend things and prepare for a possible two new members of their traveling group. It was going to be a struggle for them one way or the next. They'd have to take time to find suitable food and water here on this world unless something changed. It was a worry for them, but not something they couldn't work around – at least for a while. The two decided that they would need to try to either trade for food or hunt and forage.

After an hour or so, the silence seemed to lift, if only for a moment. There was some quiet conversation that started popping up as Etia sat at the fire, warming up some of her own rations. The visitors hadn't come entirely unprepared but were not stocked for a full journey to the Spire. It was a fact that they realized quite readily.

"If you want to travel to the Spire, it is a long journey," Etia explained to Nami as she watched the flames lick the edge of her dried ration.

"How long?" Nami asked quietly.

"About a full lunar cycle," Etia shrugged lightly. "Five or six nights to the Valley, a couple of days through the mountains, and then about ten days journey south through the mainland until you reach the cities."

Nami nodded quietly, "Not sure what any of that really means, but it at least gives an idea. How dangerous is it?"

Etia paused for a moment and pulled her rations away from the fire. She gave a small nibble of the vegetable's flesh to test the warmth and then a fuller bite. She took a breath and gave a slight shrug, "I'm sure it is. When I was a child, the Arkantors came and escorted those of us that could learn to the cities," She said quietly. "I don't remember it well – but they protected riders, bandits, and the like."

"How dangerous are the riders?"

"They tend to take what they want – but they aren't unified and spend most of their time fighting among themselves or preying on the weak and helpless," Etia explained. "If you've made an enemy of one of the Dravor, that may be different."

"Oh. Good. Glad we did that already," Nami sighed. She pointed at the foodstuff the visitor was eating on, glancing back past the woman to her partner, who seemed to be struggling to keep himself awake nearby. "What are you eating?"

Etia glanced at it, "Ajri root," She said quietly, "It's a plant that grows pretty much anywhere. A staple crop around these parts – tastes better burnt than it does otherwise," She said as she broke off a piece and stretched around the edge of the fire to offer it to the Forerunner.

Nami took it in her hand and took a breath. She paused for a moment and examined the crispy piece of alien plant. She finally took a small tenuous bite. She took a second to wait for the taste, which was incredibly bland and almost taste more akin to the fire itself than any plant. "And this has nutritional value?"

"Value?" Etia shrugged, "It'll keep your belly full – but more than a few days of just this and fatigue will take over."

The security officer nodded softly and finished the small piece she had taken, "I suppose that's better than death."

"By a little bit," Etia smirked.

"And, is he always this calm around strangers?" Nami asked as her hand drifted to motion towards Jagon, who had slowly drifted off to sleep in the lean-to.

Etia's eyes drifted back towards the sleeping man, and gave a shake of her head. "I guess he is. There's a simplicity to our situation, I suppose," She admitted, "You and the Orphans could kill us without much trouble. The fact that you haven't made him feel like we might be safe with you, or at least safer than with those under the blue star."

"The blue star is the Spire, and there are Orphans there?"

"Yes – they don't ask for much, but what they do desire they take," She shrugged, "You are either of use to them, or you are not," She took a breath, "Their guardians kill swiftly and without mercy when they are opposed. And while you seem willing to destroy us, you haven't."

"Are they like us?"

"They are few in number, but yes," Etia sighed, "I've only ever heard of one or two appearing at once, always at the foot of the Spire – with warnings or announcements." She shook her head, "But I've only been there once, and I was very young."

Nami nodded and didn't push the conversation any further than that. The tone of the visitor was clear. Something happened, and it had not been pleasant. Each little bread crumb gave the Forerunners a better view of what was going on here, but so far, none of it made sense. There was nothing about these Orphans that sounded like how they would have described themselves. Still, there were a lot of unknowns. The situation the Deucalion and his crew might have ended up in had twisted them.

There was silence again for a few moments. Etia finished her small bit of root and stretched. She glanced back to Jagon with a shake of her head. "If you and your team are going to be moving out in the morning, I should join him, I suppose." She took a moment and shook her head.

"I'll let you sleep," Nami spoke, "I might not trust you, but you're safe so long as you don't try anything stupid. For now, you're stuck with us," She nodded and gave a wave. "And if you want to chat, just let any of us know."

Etia nodded and slipped back to her lean-to. She didn't take long to crawl onto a bedroll next to Jagon and tried to find a comfortable spot. It was going to be rather challenging to fall asleep, and she knew it.

Meanwhile, Nami watched on and let the fire drift down to smolders, speeding up its decline with a little bit of nanite mist enveloping the flame and creating a small dome to smother it down to a lower stage. She glanced back and found that she was the only one still out here. She stretched with a smirk, listening to Alma and Ashkii talking over things in the distance, and Rel was mumbling to himself as he went over the data. She leaned back and looked up at the stars, laying next to the fire as the cold crept with the night.

She couldn't help but wonder what different about this Spire and the Pyrrha. They had been taught human history, and it always seemed to repeat when push came to shove. Dark factions always became more and more powerful, willing to do anything for survival. She worried that this drive was natural. After all, what

would she do to make sure that they would be safe? She knew there was a line that she might cross to protect her small family. Who was to say that someone on the Deucalion hadn't thought the same thing?

After thinking for some time, she realized that she was alone, and the only one still awake. The conversations had grown quiet, and she had missed whatever last calls for the night had been sent her way. She may have been too deep in thought. It was hard not to be here. There was a lot to dwell on. She'd likely have been put on watch anyway until someone else woke up, so she didn't fault them for the choice to leave her awake.

As the night dragged on, she contented herself with watching the sky – the twinkling stars beyond the shattered moon a reminder of where she once lived. She thought on Pyrrha and the other Forerunners, hoping that someday they would arrive safely. Maybe with their full team, they could have found a reason for all this. And perhaps they could put this world on a path without their interference. There was part of her that feared it was too late – a feeling that only grew stronger as the night grew deeper. The warmth of the fire had faded, and she pulled her jacket tight around her. A falling star drifted overhead, and her eyes fell on Etia and Jagon. This place was their world. It could never be home for her and the other Forerunners.