

Chapter 13

Etia's eyes snapped open, a moment of panic and abject fear as she realized that it was midday and that some sort of mist use had felled her. She sat up in a flash, pushing back against what she expected to be somewhere else. Her mind and eyes surveyed the surroundings to find that she was laying in her own lean-to, on her own bedroll – with Jagon right beside her. The camp's fire was still burning warmly, and the Forerunner's supplies were still here, though they had packed up their tents.

Alma, the engineer, stood near the fire, warming her hands. She started to say something, but Etia swiftly moved for her blade. She was surprised to find it right where she had left it, and as the iron dagger flipped out towards the woman. Alma held her hands up and laughed a bit.

"Etia, we're not your enemies," She spoke swiftly, her head tilting back towards Nami and Ashkii, who stood over three tied up members of her species, "Those guys are."

"You are Mist Givers, here to try to take me back," Etia accused.

"No," Rel said from nearby, as he dusted a hand against his pants, "We're confused friends. But someone was after you."

"You knocked me out," Etia protested.

"Nope, that was them," Alma corrected.

"And a perverse way to use medic neoterics, if you ask me," Rel added with a shake of his head, "You could kill someone that way if you don't know what you're doing – which they didn't." He came a little closer to Etia, "We really don't know what is going on – though Ashkii and Nami are working to find out."

The visitor took a few deep breaths and moved the knife between the two, "Why should I trust you?"

Rel and Alma both shrugged, "We're aliens, Etia. I don't think you should," Alma said with a quiet smirk, "But we've got no reason to lie to you. And frankly, if you don't trust us and want to part ways, we'll let you. Your supplies are all there and ready. It's your choice."

"Oh, and we put their coinage in your stuff," Rel nodded at the three being interrogated, then to her bag. "We don't know how much it is, or if it'll help – but we can't use it, and you helped us a lot,"

Etia sat in stunned silence, "But I saw your Captain give the wounded one Mist,"

"Yeah," The pilot spoke up from nearby, for the first time standing against the cart and stretching weak, thin legs, "It's Nagi, but that does suck. But it's an officer's neoterics. Lets him see what I see, hear what I hear. That kind of thing," He shrugged weakly. "He was just connected to my nanites for a bit."

"It is the same – I know. The Arkantor..."

"Did that to you when you were younger, right?" Alma nodded, "We figured. And we don't know what they did – but we," She motioned between herself and Rel, "think it isn't what you think."

"Did you know that Jagon has nanites in his blood?" Rel asked.

Etia looked confused for a moment.

"Rel," Nagi adjusted and quickly corrected, "Jagon has the capability of using the Mist too."

"No, he doesn't. The Mist is granted when you are young, and he was never granted the Mists," Etia shook her head.

"Well, he has them," Rel spoke, "And I'd wager most people do. I think what you went through was an awakening of sorts. Someone tried to activate your neoterics. That's what you've been brought up to think of as being given them."

Etia blinked and lowered her weapon. Her eyes glanced over to Jagon and then back to the others, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Honestly, because we're as curious about it as you are," Nagi smiled at her, "You don't need to trust us yet, for sure, but your world is new to us – and it really looks like our people may have screwed with your world."

"Which, frankly, is against our rules," Nami spoke as she stepped around their supplies and to the camp. "So, with or without you, we're going to the Spire to figure it out." She stretched and snatched a bottle from the side of their lift. She took a long sip of her water, "But, it'd be immensely helpful to know what they did to you, the culture around the Mists, and the like... from someone who has lived it."

Etia stared across at them and shook her head slightly. She seemed to be free, but she didn't trust it, "And if I refuse?"

Nami shrugged, "We offer you rations and part ways," She sat the canister of water back down.

"Did you take a drink of my water?" Nagi protested playfully with his sister.

"Shut up, Nagi,"

"Just was going to warn you I was sharing with Rel," Nagi shrugged. His sister rolled her eyes, and Rel sighed.

"Can I think about it?" Etia asked. It was a simple question and one that warranted nods from most of the group.

"Yes, you can. Always – you're a free woman here," Nami pointed out before turning back to the captives.

“What are you going to do with them?” Etia asked softly.

“Let them go. They won’t give us much, but they’ve given us more than they realize,” Nami spoke as she headed towards the three attackers.

Etia just nodded and adjusted on her bedroll. She sat down her knife and watched the others go back to what they were doing before she had awakened. She stared around at them for a time and watched them work. Not once did they look back to her like they were checking on her. They just prepped their supplies and continued getting ready. She could see Nagi watching the horizon in case there was some sort of retaliation. Alma and Rel packed up supplies – with Rel sneaking away for a moment to chat quietly with Nagi. The medic was clearly worried about him; more than a doctor would a patient. If they were close, she hadn’t caught them being affectionate. She realized that she didn’t see them a lot of time, though, and they were likely polite around their friends.

Or, maybe their shows of affection were completely different. Etia caught Rel bump his hip against Nagi’s before returning to work with Alma. It was playful and warranted a smile from both. Maybe she just hadn’t noticed the small things before. Her eyes turned to Jagon. He was still sleeping peacefully, some healing done to him from where he fell, where his skin met the ground. Small shimmers of silver had stitched his shallow wounds cleanly.

It made her turn to places she felt pain. She realized they had spent time healing her as well. She was stitched up anywhere there had been a scratch. They had no desire to leave her wounded or defenseless. That was a strategic mistake for any captors – something they didn’t seem to do with the men they were interrogating. Those men were bound by rope and under the constant eye of Nami, their warrior. She realized that she had not seen them fight. She saw little sign of a battle other than three captives.

Her eyes twisted around to the horizon, scanning for any sign of the Hawkers that had attacked them – and while she could see disturbed earth and some strange marks on the ground where the dirt was turned to glass, she couldn’t identify what battle had been there. Or if there had been one. If they had beaten a Hawker scouting party, though, more would come, and with stronger Arkantor and their loyal guardians. Her mind drifted to her safety and the safety of Jagon.

If they were going to leave, they’d be outcasts and alone for some time until they could find a new place to live. Etia realized that she should never have come here and never sought out the Orphans. Only pain came with the Mist and its users – pain that she hoped answers would alleviate, but either these Orphans truly knew nothing of her world. Or they were lying to her. Either meant solutions were not going to be forthcoming.

But, if they were truthful, they saw the mist as different than her people did. They saw it as a tool, not a boon or a bane. They were comfortable using it for all things and didn’t treat one another differently because of their different skills. She took a breath. She wouldn’t decide, for now, she thought. She laid back and let herself rest on the bedroll for a time. She would see what Jagon thought about the topic if he felt they were trustworthy enough to stick with for the time being – if he thought it was worth the danger.

Ashkii took a deep breath as he and Nami watched the three captives stumble away and run into the Steppe, back towards their camp presumably. If they were smart, they would be going a long way and making sure that the Forerunners didn't follow them. Neither of them trusted that the three men were anything close to smart enough to consider tactics beyond overpowering other folks, though. Their masters may have been a different case.

"Well, looks like we're going to be known soon enough," Nami spoke as she watched them scramble away from the camp. "Think they'll send more after us."

"Yes, I do," Ashkii spoke quietly. "They're absolutely going to go straight to their commanders and explain, and then they'll be back out after us."

"Well, that does complicate things. If they keep attacking, how long can we hold out with less lethal force?"

Ashkii shrugged, "I don't know. I hope we can find answers before it comes to that. We should likely double-time it to the mountains, though. They might know the terrain, but I have a sneaking feeling we're better geared and trained to keep a step or two ahead of them."

"I have to ask..."

"No, you don't," Ashkii stopped her, "You know what I think about using my neoterics like that."

"Fair enough, Ash," She relented, "But we would've learned more."

"Maybe – I'm not really sure that they knew anything more than they let on. Why explain any of the greater strategies to the underlings?"

"Well, because it is good strategy,"

"Not for dictators."

Nami nodded and turned back to the camp, "I'll watch the runners if you want to let the others know what we found out."

Ashkii didn't respond vocally. He just nodded and let out a long sigh. He stepped away and back through the packed camp toward the fire. He saw that the others had mostly finished preparing and were ready to head out. Even Jagon and Etia had been up talking. All of that stopped when he stepped through, and all eyes were on him. He had to make a decision, so he had.

"Seems like this world is mostly under the control of the Spire – some Orphans have taken up the role of rulers of this place," He said quickly, "And they don't like the idea of being questioned." The captain shrugged and shook his head, "I don't know what to think about that, except to hope that by Orphans they mean someone that took our name. But, let's face it. With as much power as we have compared to them, it would be tempting for some."

The captain glanced to the visitors, "We're going to the Spire to figure this out. And we're going to speed up our pace to do so. Those riders will be back with more troops soon enough. You can come with us if you want to, or we'll set you up with supplies and send you on your way. I just need to know now so we can move out – and sorry I can't give you more time,"

Etia swallowed and nodded over to him. "I need answers, and I don't think you have the ones I was looking for," She admitted, "But if we leave, I won't get any... that doesn't mean I trust you, and I might change my mind at the next town."

"I think that's fair. We're going to make a break for the mountains, try to move as quickly as possible that way, and lose the riders in the heights. I think our supplies are better than almost anything you can put together with your technology level, so I think it might be a good shot. As for what we'll do after, I'm not sure."

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