

## Chapter 14

The Forerunners and their allies set out as soon as they could after letting their attackers leave. While the locals were well versed in the area and its trials, they were not confident pathfinders, unlike the Orphans. Given that these Hawkers would follow them, they decided to move quickly and in a more arduous march. The steppe's hard ground was not a friendly hike in the best of times, but it made it even more challenging to try to move quickly. It would not be as quick as they hoped with one injured member of their party and two inexperienced survivalists.

Even the experienced, or at least trained, Forerunners were having trouble to some degree. They knew that they only had a day or two in which to get a head start on the forces that sought to find them. Slowing down from time to time to allow their least able members to rest was good for them as well, though. It gave them a few moments to adjust and to plan. They pushed harder and longer than they had in previous nights, making sure only to make camp after the cold nights fell hard around them.

They were quick to make fires and put up camps each night and eschewed the general conversations they had had each night. It was their opinion that they would be better served by chatting along the way. While they did talk some, of course, the conversations those night were not serious. They were generally memories. The group enjoyed trading stories of nostalgia with their new friends and watching as they struggled to keep up with the ideas presented by the vastly more advanced species.

Eventually, Etia and Jagon began to join in these conversations as well. With Etia translating for her partner, stories were shared and gave the Forerunners a better view of the struggle that the people of this world faced. They had been correct in their judgment. It seemed that this world was just now in a period that would have been roughly the same as their Classical eras. The bronze age, it appeared, had ended only a few generations prior when iron began to supplant the copper and tin alloy in many of the populated areas.

For those out in the Steppes, it was not as quick of a change. Much of the local forging was done slowly and rarely, keeping this region locked in the old ways for a bit longer, though the change had begun to arrive for them as well. It was a welcome change and enabled small villages to become a bit more common and stable. Still, those conversations were superficial at the best of times. They may have been able to get a better view. Nevertheless, it was apparent that Etia was careful not to allow any information about her past or that of her partner to fall from her lips unless necessary.

She spoke in extensive, broad details. She never made mentions of herself but instead focused on the land and peoples. It was useful for them to know, finding small details about the region fascinating, but there was not much depth provided. They would not find out the more intricate details that they sought. Of course, Rel was sure that would come later, with a more detailed study of the peoples. It was a hopeful thought that they might be able to stick around and learn about this world's evolution and cultures. There was no admittance at the trials that would indicate the moral and ethical quandaries around it. There was a realization for all of the Forerunners that sticking around might not be possible even for scientific purposes.

The thought always raised the fact in their minds that any action they took here, any idea of helping any soul – even Etia – was causing damage to the culture of this place. This world was already changed by their being here and whoever had come here before them. Their only goal should have been to get off-world and back to the Pyrrha, but there was something that kept drawing their minds back to the world here and how they were able to help it. If anyone could take on the Orphans that had usurped the natural order of this world, it was going to be other Orphans. Still, they hoped that it would not be a conflict. Perhaps the realization that other Orphans existed, that other ships were out there, would open up a peaceful way of handling the Spire's domination.

After the first night, they had finally set eyes on the distant mountains. Misty tips of towering mountains were at the very edge of the horizon, and while they were still a very far ways away, the sight of them gave hope that they could outrun the group that sought them. That hope quickly began to dwindle as another two days passed and the mountains grew larger and larger, ever closer to them but still distant targets beyond reach. They all realized that their lead would only be a couple of days, and then the riders would be back after them. With mounts, it was only a matter of time until they caught up to the Forerunners party.

As such, they tried to keep their pace as quick as possible. The party hoped to reach the mountains as soon as possible. Only a day or two out from the mountains, the weather turned on them. The skies clouded in the earliest morning, the temperature plummeting even as the suns rose behind the clouds. The party was forced to stop early and try to warm up and take the time to improve Etia and Jagon's clothes with what extra cloth they had in stock. While they did not have more uniforms, they did have some blankets and similar, which with Alma's neoterics were easy enough to shift into additional outerwear for their allies.

By late afternoon that day, things turned worse. At first, there was a light rain – but that rain only lasted a few minutes until it began to shift over to steady sleet. Small ice crystals fell, the sound of thousands of pieces hitting the hard dirt below, bringing a constant and grating sound to their ears and causing a bit of trouble communicating. The mountains began to disappear in the distance as visibility fell swiftly with the weather.

In the early evening, the sleet had turned to snow. It came in waves. While at first, the snow was steady and calming. The ground was soon covered in a thin layer of ice and snow, which further slowed them down. As night began to fall, the snow continued to pick up. It was clear that they were in for a long squall – and possibly even blizzard condition with the wind picking up. It was decided that they had to stop. They quickly found a suitable place to make camp and put up their tents.

While Etia and Jagon started to set up their lean-to, the Forerunners stopped them. That small shelter wouldn't likely keep them alive through the night. Instead, they were brought into the Orphans' tents. The group set up their two tents in combination, joining them together to make one larger tent and closing it off to the surroundings. Inside, Alma set up a small furnace, with a telescoping pipe poking through a small opening in the tent to vent the smoke as needed. Soon enough, a fire was lit inside the tent, and the seven souls found themselves huddled inside as the wind beat against the artificial cloth of the shelter. They wouldn't be going anywhere for some time, and they agreed that they would need to make the best of it.

Etia and Jagon seemed nervous at first. There was some worry about how dangerous stopping could be for the group and how dangerous a sudden snowstorm would be. But the Forerunners didn't seem to be worried. There was little they could do against the weather, and since they were going to have to stop, they all seemed to agree that it was worth taking the time to at least try to enjoy the night. They broke out fancier rations and beverages and began to cook them on the small furnace.

Until this point, Etia and Jagon had only seen emergency rations – but this food was dried or dehydrated varieties of meat and vegetables. Alma, who had shown little more than engineering prowess prior, seemed to be a skilled cook as well. She worked to make a bit of food for them that would allow them to lose themselves in a meal for a time. The meal would take some time, but there was also talk of treats. The locals weren't sure what the group meant by that, and they stayed quiet and watched. They soon found that the tent was warm and welcoming, filled with the scent of fresh food and the sound of friendly chatting.

Despite their situation, the Forerunners had built up what was more akin to a tavern or inn to the two locals. This camp was survival for the aliens. And yet, it was as luxurious as nearly any place the two had seen before. When eventually the mentioned treats were prepared, Nagi offered over a couple of small cups to the two newest members of their group. Etia was a bit confused and took one of the cups. She looked at the drink, a strange and dirty looking liquid with a bitter and sweet scent. She watched as Jagon leaned forward to take the other cup. She looked up at Nagi and gave a shake of her head, "I don't know what this is..."

"Makes sense... it's cocoa – or, rather, boiling water and chocolate,"

"Chocolate?"

"Oh, um. It's a sweet. Something we drink when it's cold, specifically, during the snow. It has a bit of a bitter bite because we only have darker stuff, but trust me, it's good," Nagi said quietly.

"Are you sure we can...?"

"Rel – is chocolate going to hurt them?" Nagi leaned his head back to ask the scientist.

Aurelio shrugged, "Based on early scans, I think they can eat our food fine. Their nanites seem keyed to help accept food when supplies are low, and..."

"So, yes?"

"Yes. They'll be okay,"

"See? And Rel is very rarely wrong on science stuff. Usually wrong on social stuff, but not on science," Nagi smirked.

Etia took a sip of the drink and waited a moment. The taste was pleasant, the warmth was welcomed, but she was unsure of what it would do to her. There was no buzzing of her lips or swelling of her throat after a moment, so she leaned forward for another small sip. Jagon followed suit. The two took some time to get used to the taste. But they both seemed to be enjoying it after a while.

“This is just the powdered quick stuff. You should try the real deal someday,” Nagi spoke with a grin. “What Alma lacks in empathy; she makes up for in taste.”

“This is true,” Alma said from next to the fire.

Jagon asked something, which Etia translated, “Is it some sort of ritual drink?”

“Not specifically,” Nagi shrugged, “We do drink it with snow, and I’m not really sure where that came from. Something from the old world before we had to flee.”

Etia nodded, then asked, “Why did your people flee your world?”

There was a pause. Aurelio glanced to Ashkii, who gave a permissive swing of his hand. Rel then gave a nod to Nagi.

“Well,” Nagi spoke quietly, “Our people developed something we called the Ark. It was named after an ancient tale of a great flood that destroyed our world. Multiple cultures had the tale, and the Ark legend – in each of its iterations – was about preserving humanity. So, they created this project. Arks were small probes designed to replicate and gather knowledge. Er...” He paused for a moment, “A probe is a small device that examines areas and learns about them on its own,” He explained before he continued, “Anyway, their goal was to discover how to survive the End of the world. Somewhere along the way, though, we lost control of them. They began to act on their own, devouring worlds – a plague that stretched across the entirety of our known universe. The Arks devastated our people, and in our attempt to save our world – to preserve it – we destroyed it. The backup plan was the Pyrrha. And apparently, the Deucalion. Pyrrha is where we are from. It’s a ship that birthed us, raised us, and transported us beyond the End to give us a chance at rebuilding. Of course, we planned to do that somewhere uninhabited, away from others that might have survived or arisen after the end.”

“So, your world is no more?” She asked plainly.

“Our ancestral world is no more, yes. But, if I’m honest, Reverie and Pyrrha were the only worlds I ever knew. And they are still out there. So, my world still exists,” Nagi said quietly. “And maybe once this is all over, we can find a way back to them.”

“You’ll leave our world?”

“That’s the plan,” Nagi nodded.

“We want to fix whatever happened, though. It seems like Deucalion landed here and messed up your entire ecosystem. If we can get there, we may be able to set things right. Give your people and the others that grew up here back their world,” Ashkii added.

“We’ve never known a world without the Spire, though. Or without the Arkantor or Orfan,” Etia spoke, sipping on her sweet drink. “Would it not be interfering to remove that? Such a change would be enormous for us, and I do not know how our society would handle it.”

The Forerunners nodded a bit, but Rel was the first to speak up, "Wouldn't you prefer to make your own way? To choose your own life?"

"No one chooses their life. You are given one, and you take the path laid out for you. You make the best of what you have found, even carve your way forward. Each generation before, though, is set in stone. You cannot change the future to undo the past," She shrugged a bit, "I am not a philosopher, but if your people, it seems, have already set us on a path. Perhaps some changes could be made that would make our world better, but just taking yourselves off the path does nothing for us."

"Well, that's... a thought," Nagi spoke quietly.

"We were always trained not to try to drive culture or evolution of a people forward. That our interference was only welcomed after it was asked for by the people," Ashkii spoke to her. "It looks more like our nature was forced on your people. We'd like to undo that part."

"Our legends hold no such indication. Yes, the Orfan of this day tends to be," She tried to think of a word, "distant and cold. Their loyalists even create a world where they have all the power. Why do you assume you forced this upon us?" Etia asked.

"Everyone we have spoken to suggests that we have done something or will do something to destroy the way things are here," Ashkii spoke softly. There was a moment of realization on his face for a time as Etia smiled.

"Exactly. And you plan to do just that, do you not?"

"She's pegged us there, boss," Nami laughed a bit, "No one has been wrong about us so far."

"That is disconcerting," Alma spoke as she cooked.

"But you..." Ashkii started.

Etia shook her head. "I was taken to be an Arkantor when I was a child. Someone used the same powers you did to train me to use my Mist – or so they claimed. Those people didn't want to make me a Mist Wielder. They had found a backwater girl with no prospects. They wanted to use me," She explained, "I learned nothing except that people can't be trusted. Everything they told me was a lie to get me to do what they wanted. None of that was done by the Orfan. Only the Arkantor."

"Aren't they kind of the same? I thought the Orfan granted the Mists."

"Originally, but not in generations. And really, that might be a legend. The Orfan only ever appears in times of great danger with warnings and announcements." Etia spoke with a shrug.

"Wait, is Orfan singular?" Etia nodded at the question as Rel seemed to make a connection. He continued, "We thought it was a language of a people, not of a person."

“No, there is only one Orfan – sometimes legends state there are more because the description of them changes with each person. Even we explain them as a people because we know that the Orfan is of the Spire, and the Spire is likened to a great city.” She explained.

“Is the Orfan male or female?” Rel asked.

“Female.”

“And what does she look like?” The scientist explained.

“It is hard to say. Like you, but always shrouded in the mists,” Etia spoke with a shrug. “I have only seen her from a distance. But I have heard her.”

“If you heard her again, would you be able to identify her?”

“Of course. She is burned into my memory,” Etia explained.

Alma nodded, “I see where we’re going. I can probably rig something up, but it’ll be short, and she won’t be connected to anything but us.”

“You really think their Orfan is Veda?” Rel asked bluntly.

Ashkii nodded.

“Who is Veda?” Etia spoke quietly.

“It’s hard to explain – the brain of our ship, the intelligence that kept us alive and watched over us,” Nagi said with a quiet shrug, “Mostly answering questions, giving warnings and announcements, and always cold and distant.” He took a long breath, “We’ll try to bring her up for you,” He glanced to Alma, “Though, probably not until we’re out of the water.”

“It’d take a while to set it up. If I could just sit and work on it, maybe a day or two. Now, a few days. Maybe a week?” Alma said with a little bit of a nod.

“Fair enough. We’ll introduce you when we have the chance,” Ashkii said with a quiet nod to Etia.