

Chapter 15

More stories were traded through the night of their respective worlds. The Forerunners explained more about their lives, how they lived in a virtual world, and then explained that entire concept to the locals the best they could. It was all above and beyond the aliens that listened to the stories. They couldn't comprehend much of the technology, and it all seemed to be magical to them. However, there were universalities between the two cultures. Etia and Jagon, the latter through translation, understood the stories – laughed at the odd situations from the Forerunners' past.

The night wore on, and the party eventually settled into sleep. There was a strange safety in the blizzard for them. They would not be tracked, and while the snow fell, those that chose to follow them would be forced to slow down and wait for the weather to clear. It was perhaps one of the easier nights of rest they all enjoyed in some time. Still, it was not necessarily restful sleep. There was still a lot of snow falling, and danger always followed close behind them. But there was a time when the threat had slowed, and they could take the time to rest.

The morning that followed was as calm as any the Forerunners had seen in their time here. While there was still some snow falling, the majority of the storm had passed on. A few inches of snow stacked around their tents and blanketed the steppe in an almost featureless white floor. Their tents and the few plants in the distance were all that broke the uniformity of the blizzard marred land. The cloud cover was still solid as well, bringing a strangely quiet and still vision more akin to a painting than the real world should have ever felt.

There was some short discussion on what needed to be done that morning. The party tossed around the idea of sticking to the area and letting the snow fade away before traveling. Still, there was some worry that their trackers would be on them swiftly if they waited. So, it was decided that they would start their journey as soon as possible. That required them to work quickly and plan accordingly. Ashkii took a moment to explain to Etia, and her to Jagon, how to move through snow efficiently. He explained the basics of survival in the condition and encouraged them to stick close to Nami or himself, as they would help out a bit more than the others. In this, the two visitors agreed to help spread out the supplies and help carry what they could.

Once they had sorted everything out, the party's eyes turned towards the snow-covered mountains now all but looming over them. They took their time packing up, knowing that every bit of energy would matter to them in a journey through the snow. They set out as soon as they had broken camp, and it soon became evident that it would be slow going. Each step was weightier than it had been the day before.

Still, the party moved forward through the snow. They kept their eyes up towards the mountains and moved forward, halting to let members catch their breath when needed, but always just a few moments before pushing back onto the path laid out before them. It was a challenging journey, and one that was not for the weak – but with their lift and a little planning, they were able to keep themselves moving.

The journey on that first day after the storm was very successful. The Forerunners made it quite a way, moving through the snow steadily, if not speedily. They made camp before nightfall for safety and took another restful night – though they set up watches for the night to make sure that they would have a little bit of an early call if they were followed. Given the cold, they opted to set the watches in pairs to be safe. There was little about the night worth mentioning, though, in the end—a few flurries, some animals that wandered by, but little else of interest.

The next morning, they began again on their journey with the same level of urgency they had the day before, and the cycle repeated. The early part of their trek was arduous but uneventful. By the noonday hours, they had reached the foothills of the mountain range. The gently sloping hills began small, but they became rapidly larger and higher as the day went on. It would take them another day to get through the foothills, but it was an interesting change of pace. These hills were still rather barren in terms of trees and other foliage, but the terrain's twists were at least something compared to the Steppe's monotonous flatlands.

The foothills turned out to be no more interesting than that of the Steppe during their journey, though. The journey powered through the foothills over the next day and found themselves at the foot of the mountains. There was some discussion on whether to travel along the range in an attempt to find a valley or a traveled path to move through the mountains. Etia and Jagon assured them that towards the coast, there was a valley with a village on each end that the locals used to cross the mountains safely.

That seemed like a much better idea than going over the mountains in the snow. It took some time to decide, but riders' sighting on the horizon made that a much easier choice for them. They opted to go into the mountains first. They rode up and into the wilderness, scaling into the mountain range rather quickly. Unlike the archaic carts that the locals were used to, their lift wasn't bound to the ground, and it could hover with them up the mountains relatively quickly. They raced up the incline as far as they could before night and then set up camp.

While a bit of a challenge, they set up their tents near a cliff face and layered Etia's lean-to over them. Then, they piled snow around the tents to hide them under the snow. With the assistance of a few nearby stones, they hid everything against the mountain – and then Nami and Ashkii headed out to cover their tracks and give any trackers something else to follow. They smoothed over any trace of their party moving towards the cliff and then moved to climb further up the mountains.

While they were gone, the rest of the party set about creating a small bit of warmth in their tent. Short bouts of fire to keep things warm but not put out too much smoke was all they could do. With the snow packed around the tents, they were able to keep it warm in the tent – but it was still cooler than the previous nights. All the while, Nagi watched at the edge of the tent. He kept his eyes lower in the mountains, watching as the Riders made their way into the mountains and slowly began to climb up towards them.

Ashkii and Nami didn't make it back to camp before the riders began to scale the areas near them. Their torches made it easy to keep eyes on them, and the Forerunners had no such need, thanks to their neoterics. While Nagi worried about Ashkii and Nami, their goal was to hide and let the riders pass them. For now, it seemed like it was working.

When the riders found the point of the climb where the Forerunners turned towards the cliffside, they paused. There was a moment where Nagi worried that the plan had not worked, but after a few moments of watching the raptor tracker examining the ground, he made a motion on up the mountain. They had fallen for the false trail, it seemed. The tracker waved his group forward, and they began to climb higher and higher into the mountains.

Nagi watched them climb the mountain for another hour before the flickering of their torches finally disappeared behind the shadowed forms of the mountain's features. He took a long breath and waited for any sign of his compatriots' return. While he outwardly assured that the others would be fine and encouraged the rest of the party to get rest, he couldn't shake the idea that something had gone wrong when they didn't return before the riders arrived. It wasn't the plan, to be sure.

He felt a bit useless, a bit like a glorified camera. He couldn't do much other than travel and watch, and it made him feel helpless. He was glad he could be of any help, to be sure, but Nagi would have felt a lot better if he could be more proactive. At least with the tasks, he could do, he'd do them to the best of his abilities. In this case, the pilot watched the riders and noted each and everyone he could see. He made sure to keep the count as accurate as possible and a reasonable estimate of their relative strength. It wasn't much, but it was something.

He did keep an eye towards the foothills too. He had noticed early on that the riders had left their mounts behind. The mountains were not kind to mounted troops, and they could move quicker on foot. So, they had almost certainly made a camp at the foot of the mountains. At least, that's what the pilot assumed they would have done. He wondered if they expected deception on their part. With all of their interactions thus far, the Forerunners had been very upfront. The mounts may have been taken to a nearby town or village for safety, as well, but he couldn't see any signs of anything below them – so it was impossible to tell.

It wasn't until very late that night that he finally heard sounds of snow crunching and the rest of his party returning. Ashkii and Nami had returned near midnight, exhausted and cold from their extended time out in the wilds. He raised the tent and gave them a quiet whistle to make sure they remembered where they were and could hurry into the camp. Their return was swift, and they slipped into the hidden tents with little fanfare. The others did stir in their sleep, but they assured them they could sleep. A swift fire to give a little bit of extra warmth helped bring the two back to normal.

Nami was quiet and exhausted, and as soon as she was dried off, she had found a comfortable spot near the fire and fallen asleep. She hadn't spoken a word but seemed to be relatively unshaken. That was good, at least. It meant that they felt they had succeeded.

Ashkii gave Nagi a quiet update, "We set up a few false paths leading back in on ourselves. They should realize we've duped them soon enough," The captain said with a long yawn. "We'll stay here and keep an eye out for them for a while. If we get lucky, we might be able to let them think we've gotten deep in the mountains," Ashkii smirked, "Thanks for keeping an eye out – get some rest. I'll wake Rel up and have him take overwatch," The captain said with a nod and a tap on the pilot's shoulder. "Anything interesting here?"

“Just watched the riders move past and took notes. Nothing unexpected,” Nagi said simply, keeping quiet for the others as they rested.

The captain hesitated for a moment, picking up on Nagi's lack of general snark, “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, just feel a little... useless. Part of being injured,” Nagi spoke.

“You’ve kept an eye out for us, got us down here in one piece, you’re holding your own all things considered,” Ashkii shook his head, “I know you’re injured, and that’s not going to feel good. But trust me, Nagi,” The captain said softly, “We wouldn’t be doing this well without you. Not by a long shot. We owe you more than we can ever pay.”

“Thanks, hard to think that way, though.”

“Well, if it helps prove it – Nami doesn’t think she’ll ever catch up to you.”

“That might help.”

“Good, get some rest.”