

Chapter 16

The party took time to get rest while quietly hiding among the mountains and snow. They gave their trackers enough time to follow their false path enough to provide them with space, always watching for the possibility of riders or their allies wrapping back around to find them. When they agreed that it was likely clear, they quickly worked to break camp and pack up. Moving back down the cliffs around the cliffs, they kept turned towards the valley that Etia had spoken about.

It was best to stay in the mountains for a time, so they did. This made their travel slower, more arduous, but a bit safer overall. The range gave them little more of interest to see than the steppe had done. While there was a bit more plant life, it struggled to peek through the snow in the midst of winter – and the few trees scattered along the mountainsides were thin or short. They rarely stood out as what one would even call woods in Reverie.

Another day of travel in the mountains, they turned back to the Steppe to travel a bit easier and faster. It warmed up enough that the snow began to melt around the same time, making the mountains slick with trickles of melting snow and ice. The steppe was likewise transformed to a muddy stretch of plains that nearly refused to give up their boots with each step. But the group moved ever forward, always toward their goal.

In another couple of days, they made their way far enough to see the village that Etia mentioned in the distance. It was larger than they had expected. Even from a distance, it was clear that this was not a village struggling for survival, but one with the wealth and resources to hold its own. At the foot of a valley was a large stone wall. It blocked the entrance to the valley entirely and stretched back up into the mountains on either side some ways. Towers lined the wall, patrolled by well-armored guardsmen and armed with ballistae. Compared to anything they had seen prior, the place was unassailable.

But one thing had stuck out to the Forerunners more than anything else. One glaring difference that marked this place as not just different, but as aberrant to them. Above the village's gate floated a set of small automatons. They were simple, disc-shaped drones that the Forerunners immediately recognized.

"Sentinel drones?" Alma asked as the party's forward scouts rejoined the others at their camp. "Is that possible?"

"I mean, obviously it is," Nagi shrugged at her, "Are they active or just,"

"They look active. They're floating above the gate in a little swarm like they're protecting the place," Nami's hands moved to draw little outlines of the drones in the air, "I'd hate to think of what they could do to the locals with those things."

"Etia, what do you know about the drones?"

Etia shrugged, "The guardian blades? Above the wall?"

"Silver discs – is that the guardian blades?"

"Yes,"

"So, they have been used on people," Nami groaned, "That doesn't bode well for us."

Etia nodded, "The Orfan sent them to protect the valley after a series of raids from the steppe. The Arkantor of the valley pleaded with her. He hoped that they would be able to gain defenses like those of the cities. They enabled our people to stand and build the valley villages, and to protect those who would seek safety there."

"And your people have seen them active? In recent memory?" Ashkii returned to the questioning.

"Yes, though not often. Their reputation has made them need to be used less – but occasionally as raider will not believe the stories, and will be cut down for their hubris."

"That's an unpleasant thought," Nami shook her head, "I suppose their Orfan has turned the Sentinel Weapons on to lethal modes."

"Why do they even have those options?" Rel asked, his tone a bit heated and uncomfortable, "I thought we were peaceful colonists and explorers? Not conquerors."

Nami shook her head. "The Sentinels always argued that it was in case of dangerous wildlife and that the modes could be used to help rebuild. Cutting down trees, mining, that sort of thing."

"Any tool can be turned into a weapon," Ashkii said, swinging his hand down, "We'll argue with Veda and the Sentinels about this later. For now, we have to figure out how to approach."

Nami didn't hesitate. "I have Sentinel training. I can approach first. If they do attack, I should be able to handle them. It's not like they have a walker."

"Walker?" Etia spoke.

"They're big, four to six legs, fire,"

"Oh, the old giants," Etia spoke with a realization. The response warranted every one of the Forerunners looking to her with somewhat unpleasant and astonished looks.

"Giants?"

"The city has many protective old giants. They mostly protect the spire – but one great six-legged one protects the valley road," the woman said with a nod.

"Oh, good, a six-legged walker,"

"We can just avoid that one, right?"

Etia shrugged, "The Arkantor use it to make sure only the allowed can pass. It is a sign of their utter control of the area. No one passes through the valley without their permissions."

"Why did we choose the valley to go down then?" Nagi protested, throwing his hands up.

"Because it's the quickest, not because it was the safest," Ashkii was growing tired of the discussion and the idea that this was going to be impossible for them. "We can take on some sentinel bots; we're Forerunners." He shook his head, "Arm up. We're going to walk up to the door and see if they'll let us pass through normally."

"And if they don't?" Rel asked pointedly.

"Then we deal with that as it comes," Ashkii spoke, "I don't want to take away their defenses, but between Etia's stories and what we've seen, I kind of think they're misusing our tech. And if that's the case, we'll shut it down. All of it."

There was a quiet agreement among the group. None of them felt that it was right for these people to have their weapons systems. It gave them an unfair and insurmountable lead against the others. This village was unassailable, to be sure. They could break any attacker's spirit before the battle began in earnest, and that sort of power was sure to go to anyone's head.

"Right. You heard the captain," Nami spoke, "Arm up, pack up, let's get to it."

The group quickly made sure the camp was ready to go, as Nami passed out their weapons. She pulled one of their extras from a box, brought it over to Etia, and offered the weapon over to her. The local looked up at the woman with a bit of hesitation. "I can't use this."

"Yes, you can," Nami spoke as she explained the weapon. "Hold the handle here," She demonstrated, wrapping her fingers around the weapon's handle so that the main body of the weapon rested against the back of her arm. "This is made of a nanite laced metal. If a sword comes at you, you can block," Her arm twisted up to demonstrate a blocking motion.

"Like a shield?"

"Like a shield," Nami nodded, "But more importantly since you have some control of your mist, you can link to the weapon's firing system. Just concentrate on activating the weapon, and that will establish the link. Here," She pushed the weapon toward the woman again.

Etia took it and gripped it as described. At the time, it looked enormous against her arm. She was significantly smaller than Nami, but she did as instructed. Her fingers tightened around the grip of the weapon, and she closed her eyes to think about activating it. There was a hum, and her eyes opened back up. The weapon's spine had lights now – dim, silver fire held within it, showing through to signal it was active. And a silver mist fell from the weapon, slowly carving away at it to resize to the small woman's arm. She let out a little surprised noise and looked up at Nami. "How?"

"I told you. It establishes a link. It will resize to you so that the fit is comfortable and second nature," She gave a little smirk, "Squeeze down on the handle, aim at something, and think about firing – or, I guess in your parlance, loosing. That will unleash a bolt of plasma."

"The silver fire?"

"Yes – but it's plasma," Nami held her hands up to slow the woman down a bit, "Plasma is like fire, but much hotter. If you shoot someone with this, it will burn through them and will instantly cauterize the wound. So, aim at something non-vital—a leg or arm. The pain will stop whoever you hit, but they'll survive. We don't condone killing if we can help it."

Etia nodded, "Noted. Why are you?"

"I'm giving you this in case those things attack," Nami pointed in the direction of the village. "The Sentinel drones are made of nanites, so a sword or spear isn't going to cut it. They'll keep coming. They'll split and attack and attack until you are not a threat. So, if things turn south, you use this against those," She said quietly, "Explain to Jagon how to use it. I only have the one extra, but if for some reason we suddenly have an opening, he may need to know how to use one too."

"But he doesn't have the Mist,"

"We've explained this, Etia," Rel said from nearby, "He does have nanites. His neoterics just aren't active. You don't need neoterics to key into the weapons. Just nanites. They'll detect each other."

"He's right. Maybe we'll figure out how to activate his neoterics at some point. Maybe even figure out the language thing they did to you," Nami said with a finger waving between the two, "But, for now, just explain it to him and leave the rest to us."

"I will," Etia spoke, seeming a little taken aback as the security officer moved back to the rest of the group and helped breakdown camp. The locals spoke their own language for a time, and the others finished working up the camp.

Soon enough, they were ready to move out, and move out, they did. The party headed down the steppe towards the valley, and after a few uneventful hours, they made their way to the village gates. There, they slowed. There were a few people at the gates waiting to pass through – traders and other villagers in the region. All of them stood and waited, and slowly but surely, those in the line noticed the newcomers, the Forerunners.

There was little time to take in the sights for the group. There were many of the species they had met already on the steppe, and even a few others scattered about through the population. Most had never seen an Orphan before, and much of their attention was drawn to them. That was until a call went up from the guards near the front of the line. It was in a local language, so the Orphans weren't sure what was said – but they saw Jagon tighten his grip on his spear, Etia made a noise.

"What is it? What did they say, Etia?" Ashkii asked her.

“Stop him,” She replied, “Stop the mist-thief.”

There in the crowd was a young boy, no more than ten or eleven, who raced out between the traders. He desperately sought to get out of the group and to the steppe. Guards followed but struggled to keep up with the agile runner. The boy appeared to be one of the antlered species. He had a mist about him, something that seemed to give him an extra burst of speed as he pushed through the crowd.

“He should have sneaked out... you can never run,” Etia quietly spoke as he pushed past the traders and seemed to be making good time as he raced away from the city. He made it a few more steps before the Forerunner’s eyes twisted up to the movement of the Sentinel drones. Two broke away from the rest, as a raptor broke through the crowd. His legs were wreathed in the mists, and he bounded after the boy. The two drones raced down to flank the pursuer, “They always catch you – and you’ll go right back to the temple.”

“Temple?”

“Where they hold young prospects... for the Arkantor. If you have abilities, they train you, and you are either taken as an apprentice or given to the Orfan. Of course, some of us ran,” Etia spoke softly, “And they take away your abilities – and send you to the Orfan.”

“What happens at the Orfan?”

“No one knows... but no one comes back.”