

Chapter 17

The guards were closing quickly on the so-called mist thief. The Forerunners watched uncomfortably as the drones moved beyond their target and began to twist around to cut him off. The thief turned and tried to change direction, desperately searching for an out, only to have it cut off again by the silvery discs. They seemed almost able to outguess the fleeing boy. Their speed and movement were precise and swift, but not aggressive.

Ashkii's eyes glanced to Etia. The woman had opted to look away. She wasn't comfortable watching this, and the way her eyes had the liveliness of glass. She was elsewhere, deep in memory or fear and just trying to hold on until this was all over. He looked back to the scene. The boy was likewise panicked. "Etia," He quietly asked as he looked over the scene, "You need to tell us what happens if you're sent to the Orfan. And I'm sorry, but you do not have time to wait. We need to know now."

Etia hesitated, to be sure, but soon enough, she nodded slowly. "You enter the Spire, and you do not return. The Orfan is given back the gift given, but no one returns." She admitted.

"Rel?" Ashkii asked quickly.

"I'm not sure. I'd guess, based on Etia's description, someone strips the candidate of their nanites. If they are born with them, like us," the medic spoke quietly, "That would almost certainly kill them."

"Almost certainly," Etia repeated that statement softly. Her tone was clear enough for them.

"You'll explain to us how you escaped?" Ashkii asked with a glance towards the drones. The boy was almost out of time.

"Yes."

"Nami," was all the Captain needed to say.

His security officer launched into action. She pushed off from their spot and rushed towards the boy, kicking up a small shockwave on her first push. Within seconds she put herself between the boy and the raptor. The raptor skidded to a stop, surprised, and barked something at her. Two lances of plasma lashed out from the others; the two drones struck and burned through. They fell harmlessly to the ground, inactive. Their melted forms were something that had not been seen by the locals, and it showed by the stunned look of the raptor and the gasps of the caravan guards and traders that watched the scene. Nami clenched her fist, a flare of silvered smoke rising and making her intentions very clear. The raptor took a step back and was taken aback or confused.

"Etia, can you translate? Explain who we are – I'd rather not fight our way through here, if possible," Ashkii spoke softly.

The woman swallowed and nodded slowly. She stepped forward and cleared her throat. She called out to the crowd, the young runner specifically, and spoke quickly in her tongue. People looked at her and listened. The Forerunners didn't understand, but the group seemed to be giving them a wide berth. The Raptor who had been pursuing the boy gave them leeway – backing away and then turning back to the walls. They were sure that wouldn't be the last they had to deal with the creatures and its allies here, but at least for now, they were safe enough.

Soon enough, Etia's speech was over, and she said something to the boy. It was softer and quieter than the rest, more direct to him, but likely no less critical. The traders' murmurs made it more than a little uncomfortable for them – as they felt woefully out of their elements. For the moment, though, they seemed to have avoided any violent conflicts. Then, Etia stepped back, falling in line with the rest of her party, and shrinking back towards the others. The mist thief gave a confused look, and both Ashkii and Nami gave him a dismissive wave. He didn't wait for other responses. He took off in a sprint towards the steppe and had no intention of being seen in this area again.

"What did you say?" Alma asked.

Etia gave a small shrug, "Just want I know. You are living Orphans, here investigating the Orfan and its actions in the region. That you carry the full might of the Orfan technology, perhaps even more," She sighed, "And that you had no interest in a mist-thief. I am sure it will only be a few moments before the local Arkantor arrives to look into the claims."

"And they'll likely want to fight us, won't they?" Alma groaned.

Ashkii shook his head, "Doesn't matter. Maybe we can talk to them, maybe we can't," He said as Nami returned to the group, "We'll be ready."

"Should we have risked conflict to save one person?" Rel asked quietly, "Not that I disagree with the action, but..."

"We planned on taking away their toys," Nami added, "Conflict was inevitable."

"I suppose that is true," Rel said with a shake of his head, "Just seemed like a risk."

"Would you be able to sleep at night knowing we let some kid get taken and drained of his nanites?" Nagi said with a pat on the medic's back.

"No, I suppose not." He admitted.

"We can discuss the philosophical implications later," Ashkii spoke, "For now," He pointed forward toward the gate. "We need to keep moving."

The Forerunners didn't hesitate to follow that order. The group came together and moved forward at a quiet and steady pace. The caravans of traders moved out of the way to give them a clearer walk toward village gates. Each step seemed to warrant murmurs from the audience they had gathered unwillingly outside this place. Their eyes kept moving, watching every corner for dangers they knew might be coming soon. The

walls were abuzz with activity. Drones moved around the edges, and guards positioned themselves to watch the coming Orphans – both in curiosity and driven to take up arms by voices beyond the gaze of the party.

There was movement and shouting in the city. Some bells sounded to summon someone. Etia, when eyes fell on her, only gave a little shrug. The truth seemed to be she was as unsure of what to expect now as they were. That made sense, though. This scene was unprecedented among the locals and certainly not in training for the Forerunners. They were stopped, albeit hesitantly, near the gates. A small squad of well-armed and martially trained guardsmen. They carried large pole axes – brutal when used, but generally ceremonial. The small shields strapped to their forearms and short swords at their hips were likely more commonly used in combat. Still, it was not something they would have liked to put to the test.

The party held there for what felt like an eternity. There was a slow and steady pace of communication in this world, and it seemed to drag on as messengers ran to tell their leaders and then followed up on whatever orders were given. The clouds split slightly, sunlight falling on the scene in clear rays that breached through the wintery air. For some time, there were only murmurs among the crowd and those atop the walls. The sound of the wind was almost louder at the time. It was an uneasy calm before a knowing and coming storm.

After a time, a figure appeared. A cloaked man wielding a banner appeared on the walls. He was followed by a small cadre of guardsmen in well-fitted armor. At the center was a figure in ceremonial garb – high hat and brightly colored cloak covering much of their appearance. The banner was familiar to those of the region. It was the banner of the local Arkantor, a fact that Etia passed on to the Forerunners as she could. The man ruled the place with a more theocratic ideology, as did many of those lords and ladies closer to the Spire. It was something that confirmed what the forerunners had feared; that their very appearance here had caused a massive shift in this place's culture. It would not be something that could be changed.

A crier approached the edge of the wall, peering down upon the crowds and taking a deep breath. He called out in a deep voice, powerful and precise for quite some ways. He was well-practiced, which was not his first announcement – but the Forerunners did not know what he was saying. Etia attempted to translate, but she was not a trained translator and did have some trouble keeping up. Her need to apologize for the failure only made matters worse, but there was no time to explain that to her at the moment.

Ashkii shook his head and cleared his throat, “We can’t understand you. Speak Orphan.” He called out, knowing that at least one of the people under the command of a local Arkantor would speak their language. His use of the language openly and loudly caused a hush in the crowd. He was tired of waiting. The orator that had been addressing the crowd almost visibly swallowed.

“You speak the language of the Orfan, imposter?”

“Imposter?” Ashkii sighed, “My name is Ashkii - Captain of the Forerunner vessel Atalanta, the forward exploration arm from the Pyrrha. We detected a signal from the Deucalion and are investigating. Let us pass peacefully, and we’ll be on our way.”

The orator hesitated and glanced back. There was a moment of silence before the figure bowed to someone beyond sight and moved away. Another figure stepped forward. Clothed in ornate robes and

wielding a long steel staff, the figure cast a looming presence over the crowd. The crowd shrank under the appearance, fear rippling visibly across them. Guardsmen stepped up next to the leader.

“The local Arkantor leader,” Etia explained, “And his guards.”

“We figured,” Nagi spoke with a smirk.

“How dare you speak the language of the Orfan and claim to be of her kind!” The Arkantor’s voice boomed out, exploding over the crowd with impossible volume. The Forerunners were perhaps the only people not at least somewhat taken aback by the sudden echoing voice. It was like the person had a full sound system – but it was clear to the Orphans that it was merely neoterics. “You imposters are not welcome. The Voice of the Orfan has warned us of your coming, and we will not stand by and allow you to deceive and disrupt our world.”

Ashkii took a breath and mumbled, “Etia, will you lend me a hand?”

“I can,” She responded, offering over a hand.

The Forerunner closed his eyes, and silvery mists rose around his neck, crawling across his shoulder and down his arm and Etia’s. It wrapped up around her chest and to her neck. Her eyes flared with the silver mist as well before Ashkii’s voice boomed out when he spoke next, as loud and as clear as the Arkantor, “I am an Orphan, a Child of Pyrrha. I do not heed your Voice. We do not deceive you. We are here as peaceful explorers, to find others of our kind and bring them home. We only want to pass.”

In the locals' language, Etia’s voice repeated the statements – as clear as any word spoken by the men.

The Arkantor was visibly shaken by the display but did not falter in his stance, “No! Deceivers! You have scoffed at our laws and attacked our soldiers. We will not bow to your displays. We will fight you and protect the Orfan.”

“There has been some form of mistake – we’ve only fought in self-defense, and the only law we seem to have broken was letting a so-called Mist thief flee.”

“Only a select few can wield the powers of an Arkantor. Those who have the talent are called to action, and those who pass the trials may wield the Mist – but those who were given control during their trials must return the gift to the Orfan if they cannot become Arkantor.”

“And what happens when that gift is returned?” Ashkii barked at the man, “What happens to the candidate?”

“They are sacrificed to maintain the Orfan and the Spire.”

“Well, I am an Orphan, and we do not seek sacrifices. We do not need sacrifices. We did not give you the powers of the Mist – you were born with them,” Ashkii explained, before waving a handout to the crowd,

“Not the Arkantor – all of you.” There was a rising murmur through the public as Ashkii pointed to the Arkantor, “I can prove the validity of my claim. Can you prove yours?”

“How dare you! Heretic, deceiver! There is no truth in your statement, only lies. You seek to pit us against each other, to bleed us from the inside, to tear us apart!”

“How is that exactly?” Ashkii called back, “By telling these people that they all have the powers of the Mist? Did you know that?” He spoke.

“What you ask is impossible?” The Arkantor’s voice was less sure, but there was a fear there. He said something off to one side in his language, warranting a nod from one of the guards.

Nagi perked up and kept his eyes locked on the Arkantor as something in the scene changed.

“Heretic – you have poisoned the minds of all here. We will not allow your lies to fester and corrupt our people. If you do not recant, we will be forced to show the people of this place that you are not the chosen of the Orfan, merely charlatans and false prophets.”

“I beg of you, Arkantor – do not result to violence. The Orphans do not kill unless we have to, but we are trained in self-defense, and we hold weapons beyond your comprehension,” Ashkii spoke simply. “Do not make us use them.”

The Arkantor scoffed, “You believe your weapons to be greater than that of the Arkantor? Than the forces of the Voice? No army in this world can stand before our might. You will bow like all the rest.”

“We will not,” Ashkii spoke before the Arkantor stepped back and away from the front. His guards moved forward, and the soldiers on the wall began to adjust. The mist around the Forerunner’s neck dissipated as it had appeared, and his voice returned to normal. He released his grip on Etia. “I’m sorry, that was sudden and likely hard on you. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, yes,” Etia spoke quietly, “I see what Nagi meant,”

“It’s unpleasant, right?” Nagi laughed, “But, um, what’s the word for giant in your language, Etia?”

“Venri, why?”

“Yeah – I think they’re bringing the Walker up to the walls just in case,” The pilot spoke. “I’ve been trying to read lips while he spoke off-mic, but it’s kind of hard when you don’t know the language. Venri was almost certainly one of the words thought.”

“I don’t think they’re just targeting us, either,” Nami spoke with a nod towards the archers on the wall. While many did appear to be watching the Forerunners, there were many trained on the crowd itself.

“Damn it – I was hoping they didn’t know about the nanites,” Ashkii spoke, “That the Arkantor were misinformed, not hiding things.”

“Think they’re going to try to kill the people that heard the truth and blame it on us?” Alma spoke simply, her weapon at the ready.

“That’s what tyrants do. And anyone willing to sacrifice someone who ‘fails’ training is almost certainly a tyrant, I think,” Rel muttered.

“Okay, well, we’re going to need more than just us to protect these people if that’s the case. Alma?” Ashkii spoke with a nod.

“I’m on it. I’ll be right back with one of the broken drones,” The engineer spoke before darting off into the crowd.

“Etia, can you translate for me?”

“Yes.”

Ashkii stepped over to Jagon, “Jagon, will you fight to protect these people against the Arkantor?”

Etia responded. Jagon watched her speak and then nodded. Etia served as his voice, “I will.”

“Good,” Ashkii spoke, holding a hand out towards him, “Grasp my arm,”

The words were translated, and Jagon took hold of the Forerunners arm. There was a sliver of silver mist that crawled between the two at the moment.

“Then I will activate your neoterics and key you to the role of a Sentinel. You won’t have Nami’s power or skill, or likely even her talent. But,” Ashkii spoke slowly, the mist seeming to create a light in the veins of the local near where their arms connected, “You will have enhanced strength, speed, durability. Concentrate. Summon up the strength and remember that nanites, mist, is just a tool. No more magic than your spear. But learn to use it, and like a tool, it will grow more and more powerful.”

Etia translated slowly and surely and then turned towards Ashkii. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Ashkii spoke, “Except, and don’t translate this part, I didn’t do anything. Your nanites respond to your needs. You said it when we first met. Jagon has always wanted to be a guardian. So, his nanites, when ordered, will support that. But, sometimes theatrics go a long way to giving someone the confidence they need.”

“Want me to give him a crash course?” Nami asked.

“Yes, fast as you can please,” Ashkii spoke as he released Jagon and traded places with Nami. He turned his eyes to the walls, to the gate. There were a few moments to prepare, but soon enough, they saw movement.

Alma returned with one of the downed drones under her arm. She dropped it to the ground and knelt next to it. “This will take me a while, and we might have to hold off the drones while I work.”

“Noted,” Ashkii spoke steadily, as Nagi pointed to the gate. The large doors to the city slowly but surely pushed open, a small army of guards appearing and stepping forward through the wall. They held weapons at the ready and kept in a formation for a time before spreading out to form a line against the entirety of the crowd here. And just beyond them within the gates of the city, there was the six-legged Walker, a veritable tank designed to carry Sentinels and Forerunners across impossible terrain well protected – with plasma torches and blasters typically for mining. Here, he doubted they were used as such.

“Any last words?” The Arkantor’s voice boomed from the safety of the wall.

Ashkii cast his eyes towards the man. “Not today.”

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