

## Chapter 19

Ashkii sat on the dirt of the road, with Rel standing over him, shaking his head. A stream of mist stitched the longsword cuts that had been made across the forerunner in his fight. The forerunner medic was displeased. "I can't believe Nagi was the voice of reason."

"Their entire society is built on a misconception – the idea that the Mist is something that is given. They see it as a gift that can be used only by the elite and their chosen few," Ashkii explained, his tone spent and frustrated, "Awakening Jagon's latent nanites was simple. It took him only a few minutes to learn. Everyone on this planet could do that. This world should look like ours. Instead, some haughty power-hungry bastards and their sycophants have taken that away from everyone here."

"Jagon was a thing, wasn't he?" Nagi spoke as the Forerunners sat around their captain, "He learned way faster than you did." His thumb motioned towards his twin sister.

"Shut up – he had a reason too," Nami responded coldly. She was still clearly tired from her fight.

"Either way. We aren't supposed to interfere," Rel quietly spoke as he worked on the captain.

"We already interfered. The Deucalion interfered. The entire planet's evolution was taken in a completely different direction because of us – even if it was an accident," Ashkii spoke with a wave of his hand.

"Quit emoting. It's hard enough to stitch you up as it is," Rel said quietly. "And what right do we have to reverse course?"

"No more than their Arkantor caste has to control the lives of the others on this world," Ashkii barked back, but he stayed still at least. "We can unlock the potential of this entire world, or we can take away the neoterics. But either way, that caste cannot remain, even if we leave."

"What gives us that right, Ashkii?"

"They sacrifice people who fail trials, Rel! They use our neoterics to create an authoritarian regime where one caste controls every ounce of power, and anyone who stands against them is cut down. Ideals are important, but some outweigh others. Our inaction is tantamount to support. So, we have to do something about this." Ashkii argued.

Rel nodded, "I agree," He said quietly, "I just needed you to say it out loud. So," Stitches of silver brought Ashkii's wounds together as the medic spoke, "What is the plan?"

"The plan?" Ashkii shook his head. "Go face off against this Voice, get to Deucalion... and I don't know."

“Well,” Nagi spoke with a little shrug, “Why don’t we just shut off the good stuff?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, these people don’t need Sentinel abilities, or the ability to link with technology like Alma – but better health, life, some quality of life neoterics – all those things would be fair to leave active, right?” Nagi shrugged again, unsure, “I don’t know that is even possible, but it’s a thought.”

“I don’t know. We’d have to look into it. Even if we can just take away their Spire and change the topic of the Orfan, I think we can put an end to this nonsense,” Ashkii spoke with a shake of his head. “I suppose we go to the Spire, say hello to the Voice, and talk to the Orfan, and then we can go from there.”

“Speaking of,” Alma spoke after a moment, “I could probably get Veda up temporarily if we use the power from the villages drones.”

“I suppose that’s worthwhile. We need to take a minute or two to rest. Maybe stay here overnight before getting back on the road – but we do need to move fast,” Ashkii spoke softly, “But we need to move quickly from here on out. We can’t give the Voice too long to prepare for us. Who knows what technologies they have from the Deucalion that they are using to keep control of the people.”

“Right. We’ll make camp. And when Etia and Jagon get back from explaining everything to the locals, we can maybe introduce them to Veda.”

The Forerunners had set up their camp at the edge of town, leaving the locals to their own devices. Etia and Jagon went out to explain the journey so far and what they had learned to the other locals. Word spread quickly about the Forerunners and their ability to grant or take away neoterics – or the Mist in the local parlance. Still, they had been left alone for the most part. They didn’t speak the language yet, and aside from some simple phrases that Rel had picked up, they couldn’t communicate. Instead of appearing confused, they chose to appear cold and distant. It was likely best for the people as a whole.

Etia and Jagon returned to their camp that evening, shortly before the setting of the suns. They slipped into the tents to join the others and found them all sitting around a new figure. The figure was diminutive, only a couple of feet tall, and translucent. To the two locals, it was like nothing they had ever seen before. This was nothing out of the ordinary to the Forerunners – just a small, portable Veda program.

“Hey, welcome back,” Nagi called out as they entered.

“How did talking to the other locals go? What do they think of all of this?” Ashkii interrupted him.

“They are confused – but they saw Jagon use powers of the Mist. People from his home village were in the crowd; they confirmed he had no such powers. And the Arkantor awoke and attempted to break free. But with no powers of his own, he was just a frail, older man. Those actions have shaken them, but people believe that you are at the very least of the Orfan.”

“Speaking of,” Alma said, spinning around a drone on which the small hologram stood. “Is this the Orfan?”

“Hello,” The hologram spoke as she turned her head up to face Etia, “I am Veda. I am an artificial custodian and connection to the Pyrrha database. Warning, no connection to Pyrrha is detected. Only simple functions are available. Is there anything I can help you with?”

There was a long pause in the tent as Etia stared at the hologram. Alma leaned to one side and nodded towards the hologram, “Is this the Orfan? From your experience?”

“Yes, but bigger,” Etia spoke softly, “How did you?”

“As we told you, Veda isn’t a real person. She’s artificial intelligence. Software and programming designed to look and act like a human to make interacting with our ship’s systems more comfortable and easier,” Alma spoke. “Veda, can you explain.”

“Yes. I was designed with the function of caretaking of Pyrrha’s ship systems during inactive periods and before the Orphans' awakening. Once the Orphans awake, I serve as their personal information assistant and interface with the Pyrrha systems. Unfortunately, I am currently disconnected from Pyrrha’s database and cannot provide more than simple responses.”

“How does she appear here?”

“Well, technically, we have data chips with pieces of her available to us, and I just worked to adjust the drone to be able to transmit a holographic signal,” Alma rattled off details.

“Yeah, that’s not what she’s asking, Alma,” Nagi spoke, “It’s simple. Veda is just a tool. The one you saw was a tool of the Deucalion, we think.”

“A tool? Like...”

“A fireplace,” Veda spoke up. “Multiple homes have hearths and fireplaces that are nearly identical. Each uses the fireplace the same way, and the fire appears similar – but the fireplaces are not the same. However, in some larger homes, a fireplace may warm multiple rooms.” The hologram nodded to Etia, “Does that metaphor help your understanding of my programming?”

“I suppose a bit,” The woman spoke. “You seem different than the Orfan, though.”

“My programming in this form is minimal – I’m only able to handle basic personal assistant duties and nothing more. The version of Veda you met may have been connected to a larger database. With additional resources, any number of tasks can be assigned to me, and I will do my best to undertake them.”

“What can she,” Etia paused midway through her statement and looked to the hologram, “do? Should I be addressing her directly?”

“She’s not really a person, so you don’t have to,” Alma explained.

"That's kind of mean," Nagi protested.

"Forerunner Alma is correct. While the term Artificial Intelligence is often used for my programming, and the term is accurate, the term Virtual Intelligence is usually more understandable. My similarities to human intelligence are purely programming. I can imitate emotions and empathy, but it is an imitation. I do not actually feel emotions or empathy."

"That, on the other hand, is a bit disconcerting," The pilot shook his head. "Or is it just me?"

"It's just you," Ashkii spoke up from nearby.

"I don't fully understand," Etia spoke, "But she is the same woman, at least in appearance and tone, as the Orfan of our time."

"Hm... if there were Orfans of other times, they could have been Deucalion crew, right?" Rel asked.

"Possibly. Or the Arkantor just use that to explain the immortal lady who only appears when needed," Ashkii pointed out. "I suppose it doesn't matter. We'll figure it out when we get there."

"You are still going to the Spire? Even knowing the Voice is going to be waiting for you?" Etia asked quietly. "That's is a death sentence."

Ashkii took a breath and shook his head. "Right. We thought you might think so, which is why we did this," He spoke, pointing to the small Veda. "She should be able to answer any questions you have about basic neoterics and can help you and Jagon learn more about it. All we ask is that you spread the word and maybe even teach others. You've put us on the right path, and we can handle it from here."

Etia nodded and then suddenly shook her head. "No, no. I intend to go with you. I simply thought that you would be interested in a plan before approaching the cities and the Spire."

"We have a plan," Nagi spoke. "A decent plan if I do say so myself. And it doesn't put the locals in danger."

"Well, less danger," Rel added.

"Right," Nagi nodded.

"What is your plan?" Etia asked.

"Steal the Walker and use it to sneak into the city. If we can get close to the Spire, we can get into it. No real fighting – just a quiet stealth mission to the Walker, then using it walk through like the Arkantor sent us to support the Voice."

"But you know nothing of the Voice or the ways of the Arkantor," Etia protested.

"True, true," Nagi spoke.

There wasn't any response past that for a moment, until Etia threw down her arms, "That is it? Your argument was that I was right?"

"I wouldn't call it an argument," Ashkii spoke softly.

"The armies of the Voice are a serious thing. A dangerous thing. You can't just go in without thinking."

"Etia, calm down," Ashkii said with a smirk, "We know. We're going to gather information on the way. And once we steal the Walker, we'll be able to examine its security footage. Once we do that, we can get enough information to fake it for a time. At least long enough to get us to the Spire. If we're right, and the Spire is Deucalion – once we're there, we'll be set. We can connect to that Veda, and once we have that, we'll be back in control of the ship. Sentinel drones will be under our control,"

"Well, Veda's control – but she'll listen to us," Alma corrected.

"How do you know she will listen to you?" Etia asked.

"I am not able to refuse orders from the Orphans, so long as they do not conflict with primary protocols," The little hologram stated.

"We have some theories on what the Voice actually is," Rel shrugged, "Though without knowing your peoples' history, we don't have enough to make a conclusion,"

"But we assume it's a tyrant that figured out that Veda can be given orders," Nagi spoke with a smirk, "Probably a series of them – trading mandate of heavens when one leader stopped having full control."

"Mandate of heaven?" Etia asked.

"Divine right, the idea that a ruler was placed there by the gods," Nami piped up. "Popular among monarchs, nobles, dynasties."

"This does sound familiar," The local said with a nod. "How will you take the giant?"

"Let us worry about that."