

## Chapter 04

Nagi gasp as he woke up. Instinctively, he sat up swiftly, shattering the stasis bed's crystalline cover and causing it to disperse to mist. It took the young man a few seconds to realize where he was, what was happening. His eyes darted around the room, and it all came rushing back to him. His stasis bed lay tucked into the hall just outside the cockpit. It was a clean, crisp hall – seldom used and still shining white metal despite its age. Though now, the corridor bathed in red lights, warning signals from all available consoles.

A klaxon blared in the cockpit. Nagi could see consoles up, data flowing, but his eyes weren't fully working yet. Everything was a blur. But through that blur, he could see something, the bright blues and green of a world, blocked by thousands of smaller grey objects. He blinked and put a hand on the edge of the bed, turning to look down the ship corridor towards the other stasis chambers.

"Warning," He heard Veda's voice from the cockpit, "Lethal impact imminent – reentry angle is too high. Reentry speed is too high."

"What the hell?" Nagi struggled to sit up before his eyes lowered to the stasis systems tubes connected via his chest. He could feel that his legs were still partially numb, "Where are we?"

"Unknown," As Veda answered, he put a hand on the tubes in his chest. As his fingers hit the cold transparent material – one filled with his blood, the other pumping a silver flow of nanobots – the computer voice objected, "Warning. Stasis procedures are not complete. Removing likely to cause severe injury or death to the patient,"

"More likely than a hot reentry?" The pilot laughed as he cringed, and his grip tightened around the tubes.

"No." The computer didn't seem to understand his sarcasm.

"Decided then," He said with a breath, and a firm yank away from his chest. The tubes sprayed blood and that silver fluid onto the bed, and the same liquids dripped from both ports in his chest. He let out a yell and fumbled as his body reacted to the sudden loss of blood flow, and what nanites were there struggled to keep him alive.

It took him only a second to recover, at least enough to push off the bed. When he did, his legs gave out immediately. He hit the floor hard, unable to catch himself with weak arms, but he started to push himself up after a moment on the cold metal walkway. He reached out a hand and pulled himself forward toward the cockpit. His legs weakly attempted to push him as well, but their state made them virtually useless. Each attempt turned into a slide, while his arms continued to pull him ever forward.

He groaned as the ports on his chest scraped against the floor, pain jumping through his limbs as feeling began to return. The pain was sharp at first but soon drifted to burning. The nanites in his blood were

not supposed to be there, and with the amount of stasis liquid still coursing his veins, he could feel it. He could feel his waking body starting to panic, to somehow realize what was happening. He knew time was short.

“Veda... manual controls?” He asked as he pulled himself forward.

“Active.” The computer calmly replied.

He had reached the center of the cockpit, nearly close enough to reach the pilot’s chair. As he stretched and his fingers found the fabric of the seat, he worked to keep his mind clear – to push back the pain and the failing parts of his body. “Where is Pyrrha? The other Forerunners?”

“Unknown,” Veda responded.

He took a few quick breaths and mustered what little strength he had. His arms strained to pull his weight up towards the chair as his legs dangled helplessly behind him. One foot finally found purchase on the deck and gave him enough force to reach the chair. It took him a minute of scrambling, but he twisted about to face the controls. His chest was marked with red and silver, medical cloth soaking with the viscera. The nanites attempted to seal damage to the ports done during the short trek. The silver liquid flowed around the ports, moments of mist with breaths they tried desperately to keep their host moving.

He knew he was running on borrowed time. He let his eyes focus as the control panel in front of him displayed flashing warnings of all sorts. He didn’t have the time or mental fortitude to go through all of them now. His hands reached out to the flat panel, the metal twisting into a liquid and rising along his hands to his wrist as he took the controls. He quickly began to move, the almost gel-like controls around his hand intuitive and comfortable for the trained pilot.

He tested his controls. First, he attempted to slow things down – to fire reverse thrust. When he did, a new warning popped up to his left side. “Veda, audio warnings – I can’t read right now,”

“Warning, reverse thrust systems damaged, and inoperable.”

“Oh, good,” He said as he watched the viewscreen, other commands seeming to work well enough. He could tilt and arc the ship as he needed. So, that is what the pilot did; he pulled back his arms. The Atalanta lurched as it began to twist toward the horizon of the world in front of them. But that globe was still growing much too fast. He gave everything to try to change the trajectory as much as possible, using inertia to throw the speed off of them a bit – and while it was helping, it wasn’t going to be enough. He scanned the viewscreen for a moment, spotting the gray debris he had seen earlier.

They were large, gray rocks floating just above the world – likely just below stable orbit around it. But there were a few that Nagi could use. “Veda,” He said, “I’m going to fly this like a spear – put all nonessential power to integrity.”

“Working. Shutting down remaining Reverie connections. Switching to reserve life support and power for all remaining systems.”

“That’s a start...” He spoke as he arched the ship back around towards the planet’s other horizon. The forces pulled him tight against the chair, his vision blurred and blackened for a moment, and then the ship was pointed in another direction, having slowed – but as the warnings blared, it was still not enough. He winced. It wasn’t the pain of what was happening to his body, but what he expected from his only plan to slow down.

His arms swung through the metallic gel, twisting the craft back around to the original pole it had faced, and he waited for the alarm he expected to hear.

“Warning,” Veda chimed in, “Collision with debris eminent.”

“I know,”

“Damage to starboard thrust likely,”

“I know.”

He muttered as the ship banked into the edge of one of the pieces of debris. A spray of gray stone, dirt, sand, and ice covered the viewscreen for a moment before fading behind the ship. While the *Atalanta* continued forward, ever closer to the planet’s atmosphere, now it was spinning.

“This is a bad plan,” Nagi said to himself as he watched the viewscreen, pushed into the arm of his chair, and still losing blood. “Such a bad plan.”

The view faded away from the planet for a moment, out to the system beyond. Nagi could see distant stars. Maybe most importantly, he realized what the debris field was. It was the world’s moon – torn into pieces. It had broken apart and fallen into a slowly decaying orbit. Something shimmered in the moon’s largest section as he lost sight of it, and the planet swung back around.

“Entering the atmosphere. Warning, reentry speed too high. Reduce speed immediately.”

“I know... I know. Shut off audio warnings.” Nagi spoke as the ship plummeted into the atmosphere, spinning wildly out of control. Each rotation, he fired the remaining thrusters, holding them as long as possible to try to adjust the spin to gain a semblance of control again.

The spin had met gravity, and between the thrust and trajectory gravity pulled them into, he was gaining a little bit of control. But he had realized a long time back that it wouldn’t be enough to stop a crash. All he could do was hope for something to lessen the impact. As the ship’s viewscreen stopped its spin and found a course down, he struggled to line it up with any particular target. There was not much he could do about the thrust now – only minor adjustments made while he pulled the controls to try to adjust the trajectory up and slow their descent as much as possible.

More holograms raised from console after console as the ground raced up to meet them. The pilot grimaced. “Veda, scan the surface. Find the other ships. Put it in a hard backup – and then put everything to integrity on my mark.” He said as his eyes scanned the planet through the fiery heat shield and viewscreen.

The ship pierced a cloud, exploding out the far side in a streak of steam and fire – just past foothills of a great mountain range. It raced beyond to where Nagi felt they had the best chance to survive a landing that he could see. It wasn't much, but there was a lot of unforested, flat land here. A steppe, maybe. A desert might have been better, but he picked what he could and tried to give them the best possible angle. As the ship followed along a river for a moment and then broke away towards the edge of this great flat plain, he took a breath.

"Mark, Veda." He said.

The cockpit controls released him. The gel-like metal faded away from his arms, and he leaned back into his chair. The adrenaline had held him this far. The nanites pushed him beyond what should have been possible. The chair's safety restraints gripped him, but it didn't matter.

"Protect the pods with everything we have left," He mumbled as the viewscreen flickered off. The room and his vision fell to darkness. "Keep them alive," He put a hand to his chest, finally touching the soaking and bloody shirt near his ports, "I did what I could, guys. I love all of you, and Veda, tell Nami I'm sorry she has to do this alone."

The last words were barely a whisper as he faded, his head lulling down, and whatever spirit was left in him, finally slipping away.

A fireball streaked across the morning sky, a trail of debris following behind it. The object shone like a star and brightened the morning to noon as it passed over them. It sped by, almost faster than one could follow, and flew to the distance, ever lower and lower. Eventually, it hit the surface. From this distance, all that could be seen was the aftermath – a column of dirt and debris erupting into the air along its path, rumbling up like a tremendous earthen wave. Seconds later, a wave of force raced by, tearing untied cloth and supplies from the back of steeds. The sound that followed was booming, louder than the strongest of thunderstorms. The animals were spooked, attempting to flee from the scene and find safety. But a hand tightened around the reins, and another reached up to calm the beast. The dust began to block the morning sun – but the glowing fire of heated dirt and the object itself could be seen for leagues. There was little hesitation for some, like her, to race towards it.