

Chapter 05

Waking up from Reverie unannounced was a disturbing experience. In the few times they had woken from Reverie prior, it had always been done with warning. It had always felt like waking up from a nap. In this horrible instance, it was sudden. Mid thought, the fabric of reality broke apart, faded to black, and seemed to reboot them in the real world. It was sudden, abrupt, and there was nothing more than the blink of an eye, then the first breath of wakefulness in a long time.

This was even more abrupt. The ship was dark, with no sign of light or power. It was as black as deep space, with no life rising from any system, and the crisp artificial air had been overwhelmed with a distinct smell of heated metal, fire, and ash. Creaking metal signaled the hull's weakening, and it was clear that the very last systems to shut off had been the stasis pods.

Ashkii sat up after a moment. He groaned, and while it was pointless, he did attempt to look around the room to find some light. When none was found, he held out a hand. He was tired, still not completely aware of his surroundings, but he still had the strength to command the nanites in his body. With a thought, a mist rose from his hand, small sparks of light between thousands of microscopic machines creating a little wisp of light. He looked around again, holding the wisp in his outstretched hand.

The little light that was there dimly lit a few meters around him – enough to move and little more. He stepped off the bed and moved to the other stasis pods in the chamber. The first held Nami, still unconscious, but he could see the independent breaths, the last of the nanites flowing into the ports. She would be okay. Likewise, Alma was in the final stages of waking up – maybe a bit behind Nami, but she'd be in the real world soon enough. Then he checked on the last bed and found it empty.

"Rel," Ashkii coughed, his voice still hoarse from waking. He cleared his throat and picked up, "Rel!" He tried to yell, though it came out as more of a hard word than anything else.

Aurelio's voice came from the cockpit, "Here, Captain,"

There was a somber tone to the voice, something instinctive that Ashkii recognized but couldn't quite place. He stumbled forward, moving in that direction. Gravity was still relatively new to him, at least the non-virtual variety, and the ship was clearly at an extreme angle. One he couldn't explain. He stepped up the corridor and found Aurelio sat against the wall, just before the pilot's stasis pod. The dim light that fell on the young scientist's face made it abundantly clear that something was wrong. He was exhausted, completely spent, and seemed to have been up for a while.

"What's wrong... where's?"

"Nagi is..." The medic stuttered, pointing to the deck plating. Ashkii's light instinctively followed, "Dying." Aurelio finished. "I did what I could... Integrity kept the impact from crushing him, but just barely."

He took a long breath, "I used every last bit of energy we had, just... just to stabilize him..." The medic shook his head, "Made... extra nanites... used most of my reserve..."

Ashkii started to step forward but stopped when Aurelio held out a hand.

"Captain, I wouldn't," Rel said with surprising clarity. "Impact did a lot of damage – if we weren't designed to be rebuilt over and over during stasis, he would be dead..."

"What do you mean?" Ashkii asked quietly.

"I mean... we hit the ground hard. We survived – but Nagi was in the cockpit. There wasn't a lot that could be done for him... nanites are rebuilding him, but..."

"But..."

"Without a secure power source, they aren't going to be able to put him back together..." The medic said quietly, "Even with one... it's a lot of damage. I honestly can't be sure they were able to save him during the crash..."

Both heard a noise – an awful sound of a sister who had just overheard that conversation. There may have been a word spoken, a cry for help, but all that came out was a wail, and Nami tried to push past the two. Ashkii expected to have to catch her, to hold her back. But as soon as his arm reached out to stop her and she hit it, she crumpled to the floor. Her voice was gone, whimpers and cries barely escaping her throat as she peered past the two and into the darkened cockpit.

Ashkii knelt next to her, keeping an arm on her shoulders as she fought back rivers of tears unsuccessfully. "Any other options, Rel?"

"M...maybe if Alma can connect... vehicle cores, I can get... more time, but..."

"We'll do it. Nagi got us down safely; the least we can do is try everything, right?"

"Right," Rel nodded.

"Nami," Ashkii spoke to the woman, "Stay with Rel for now, okay. He can keep you close to Nagi while I wake up Alma, and we see what we can salvage."

She seemed to agree with that, though it was still beyond her to speak more than short, quick affirmatives – more hums and sounds than words or thoughts. But they seemed to get clearer after a moment.

Ashkii stayed with her and Rel for a few moments more before he stood up and started to move back towards the stasis pods. He kept the small light out in front of him, carefully climbing through the down ship towards the destination. He eventually arrived back in the stasis room, his light falling on Alma as she sat and adjusted on the side of the bed. He took a look and started to speak, but he hesitated and gave pause.

Alma twisted her gaze up toward him and the light and took a breath. “Not the landing we expected?” Her voice asked through the scratching hoarseness they all faced as they struggled to integrate back into the real world.

“No. Not sure what happened. Nagi got us down alive, but he’s dying. No power. Rel thinks if we can coopt power from the vehicles, we might be able to stabilize him.” Ashkii filled her in as he nodded back beyond the bay, towards the cargo hold at the ship's end.

She nodded. “I can do that,” She spoke softly, hopping up and onto the ground. She wavered, teetering for a moment before finding her footing, and stepped in line behind her captain. “It’ll be easier to work if we can blow the hatch – pull the cargo out into the world where I can be flat...” She said as they climbed up the incline, then came to a sealed door that blocked their path. The young woman squeezed past Ashkii, brushing along the bulkhead and to the edge of the door.

“Can you open it without power?”

“All doors have a failsafe – mechanical drives that will let them open,” She spoke as she put her hand against the door panel. Without power, it would have been pointless for most, but a small trickle of silver drifted out of her palm and across the console. The rivulets of nanites crawled into the crevices around the console. For a split second, it was quiet, and the flickering wisp of light seemed to be the only movement. Then, the manual override released with a loud crack. The door screeched, twin sealed bulkheads sliding back and away to opposite sides of the wall, and the corridor flooded with bright light and cold air. Ashkii and Alma moved to shield their eyes momentarily. Their vision faded to almost solid white before their eyes could adjust to the world outside. Ashkii blinked his eyes a few times and held a hand up to shade them. He peered out of the great flat land, torn asunder by their landing. Walls of dirt and rock raised around them as they lay sank into the earth – but perhaps most importantly, he could see their cargo hold.

The ship, it seemed, did not make it in one piece. The cargo hold was scattered along Atalanta’s crash site, torn into pieces, and ripped apart by the force of the landing. Scattered debris marked most of what they had brought with them.

“Captain,” Alma said as she glanced back to him and shook her head. “I might not need to blow the hatch.”

“Thank you for pointing that out, Alma...” He sighed and grabbed onto the edge of the open doorway, and peered out into the wilds. “Well, let’s take a look and see what we can figure out.” He gave a shake of his head as he felt worry start to slip into his mind. This was not as they had planned at all. There was nothing about this going according to the training. He climbed down the wreckage of the ship carefully, followed by the engineer, and the two stepped out into the field and got their first view of the world where they found themselves.

Instinctively, the two looked up to the sky. It had been their homes for all their lives, and now it seemed so distant. This world was nothing like the expected. A sun was low on the horizon, a cold yellow star with a distant blue companion millions of miles in the distance – but visible beyond it. The sky was littered with shimmering proto-rings and the remnant of a cracked and broken moon. While one significant portion

still hung in the sky, about a quarter of it crumbled and fed into the ring slowly formed by the world's gravity and tidal forces. Wispy clouds floated peacefully along the sky.

The air was cold, not freezing, but to them felt autumnal. It felt like a change. The forerunners saw no trees around them, though, only tremendous and endless plains in all directions. Meager flora dotted the landscape, drifting softly to and fro in the wind. Some wild animals grazed in the distance, birds fluttering and gliding along the wind streams safely above them. The two stood for a time and just watched. It was an impossibility that they stood in, or perhaps an improbability. This place was a new world, some many thousands of years beyond their home, and yet parts of it were so familiar they could name them.

When they eventually found themselves in the wreckage of the cargo bay, they saw their old lives broken and tossed about before them. Items they had trained with for ages lie shattered in the dirt, damaged beyond repair. The luxuries they expected, the technology that would guide them about, and keep them in relative ease was all but no more. They started the arduous task of gathering what had survived. All the while, shadows lengthened near the end of the day.

They took stock and found themselves much lower on supplies than they needed. Still, there was good news. The vehicle power sources could be salvaged and used to try to help Nagi. For the first time, Ashkii hesitated at that order. They would be on their own nearly entirely without those power supplies. He shook away the thought and gave Alma the go-ahead to start taking things apart. She could tell him what to do, and he'd lend a hand. The two opted to work on the more extensive sources first, taking apart their shuttle for its core. This task was likely the hardest thing to do – but should they pull it off, they could find help another way. Once they found Pyrrha, there would be plenty of power sources to go around, and they could start surveying the world properly. Even another Forerunner ship would work. Both of them lost themselves in the task, never quite aware of their surroundings when they took to a job. It was a somewhat peaceful place, though, and they needed to work quickly due to the cold. Or, they thought it was quiet.

There was a sound that finally broke their concentration – both looking back towards the plains as the suns began to set. The crash site was still lightly lit by some smoldering, but for the most part, the fires had long gone out. A group of animals approached quickly.

“That’s impossible.”

Alma’s voice cut him like a knife. As they watched the animals’ approach, it became evident that they were not just lone animals. They were domesticated, with riders atop them. The view was poor due to the light, but both stood and stared. “We couldn’t have been out long enough for a colony... right?”

“They would have seen us crash... sent a rescue,” Ashkii responded as the riders grew closer and closer to their location.

“Could that be the rescue?” Alma asked.

Ashkii swallowed, a sinking feeling in his stomach as he watched them get closer and closer. He twisted his fingers together in one hand. The tips of his fingers pulled nanites from his skin, another wisp of light forming in his palm. He tilted his weight back and pitched forward, the wisp launching into the air

towards the riders. It streaked across the sky and, once near them, erupted into a short-lived flare, lighting up those that approached harmlessly. Their animals were startled, the riders responding with startled gasps and callouts in a language neither of them knew. For the first time, with the light of the flare, they could see them.

“That... can’t be...” Alma repeated. “Candidate worlds weren’t supposed to have advanced life... It was supposed to be too early.”

Ashkii was almost frozen. There, only hundreds of meters from them, were fantastic scaled beasts, not unlike horses. Their scales were metallic, shimmering in the light of the flare – but until they got close, he couldn’t get a good look at them. Their riders were the same – but he had concentrated on them. They were humanoid, not unlike them, but their skins were a myriad of colors – predominantly reds but scattered blues and oranges. He counted nearly twenty riders. All of which rode armed with ancient weapons—bows and spears and great curved blades at their hips.

“The flare might have been a mistake,” Ashkii muttered as a whistling bolt from a bow flitted past them and pinged off a broken piece of deck plating. Both of them instinctively ducked after the fact, but Ashkii was quick to respond, “Get behind something – don’t make a break for the ship,”

“Right,” Alma agreed as the two crouched and moved to get behind the shuttle.

“Can you reach a weapon?” Ashkii asked as both hands lit up with wisps, each tossed up towards broken pieces of the ship, lighting the area up as the riders approached more cautiously. “Without getting out from behind the shuttle.”

“Maybe?” The engineer held out a hand, a mist of nanites appearing and fading as she held her digits towards a distant crate where they had stacked some supplies. “No... my neoterics don’t reach that far... I could make a...”

“Don’t you dare Alma,” He said, pointing at her and then taking a cautious glance around the edge of the shuttle. The riders had spread out, watching them closely and slowly working on starting to surround them. He could see more of them now, and with the light, it was much more manageable.

Horns twisted up from their heads, each in a unique number of patterns. The creature's color seemed to be caused by scales, much like the animals they rode – no, protofeathers, he corrected himself after a moment. Their eyes were those of predators, forward, large, always moving. They had plates along their jawlines, likely from evolution from saurian or avian ancestors. Each wore rudimentary armor made of hide or leather. Their weapons were steel or iron, though. Save for the bows, which seemed to be a mix of bone and wood.

“I can reach the arrow...” Alma murmured as he came back around, watching the arrow slide across the dirt to the engineer's feet and up to her hand. She let the nanite mist encase it, “So, one shot.” She smirked, “At least its basic geometry.”

“I guess it's...”

“Arkantor, abracht toal!” A booming voice echoed through the shattered cargo bay.

“Damn it... they’re sentient, armed, and we shouldn’t be here... is this even the right planet?” Ashkii asked quickly, looking to his engineer, who just shrugged. “I’m going to get another look... coming up with a plan.”

He looked back one more time. They had bows knocked, and the one speaking had ridden forward. His armor was extravagant, his green proto-feathers larger and more vibrant. His saddle was more ornate. He couldn’t read his face though or his body language – but when one saw Ashkii, it raised its bow, swiftly pulling back a string and loosing. The forerunner ducked back around the corner to hear a harmless pinging against the shuttle’s hull.

“Abracht toal!” The leader bellowed again.

“Second arrow...” Alma whispered.

“I’ve got a plan... I’m going to stall them. Just for a minute, okay,” Ashkii spoke. She just nodded. He took a deep breath and then barked back in a yell, “I don’t understand what you’re saying. Do you speak my language?”

“Really?” Alma whispered.

“Shut up.”

There was some quiet chatter from the others. Then more words from the leader, “Abra cava vosh?”

Another voice could be heard, quieter, without the tone of the riders. “Orfanvosh, Dravor.”

“Orfan?” Both Alma and Ashkii said quietly. “That’s a big coincidence, right?” Alma continued.

“Maybe.” Ashkii took another glance, just popping his look around the shuttle one more time to catch a glimpse of the new voice. It wasn’t one of the proto-feather riders. Instead, it was much more humanoid. It looked almost like them, but with sharp ears and antlers rising from just behind them. He couldn’t see much more before an arrow loosed again.

“Etre. Yn jor helev Orfan,” The leader said in a less loud tone, but much colder a voice. It was followed by the sound of the riders dismounting and the drawing of bows.

“Not sure it is a coincidence...” The forerunner captain said simply, taking a long breath. “Okay, Alma...” Ashkii said quickly. “On my mark, make a break for the weapons. You’ve got three shots now...” He said as flares lit in both of his palms, and she gathered the arrows. “Remember the rules of engagement,”

“Right, ready.”

Ashkii took another breath and then pushed off from the shuttle, darting just out from cover. As he did, his hand lashed out, a dart of light racing towards the riders and exploding in a flare. There were a series of screams, arrows loosed towards the forerunner, but he had already moved back to cover. As soon as the

arrows stopped, he waved Alma out. She bolted across the field of blinding light, three archaic arrows floating around her right arm, and ready for use when needed. As the light began to dim, Ashkii followed her, throwing another flare – buying them another few seconds. It was just enough time for both to make it to the crates.

The flare dimmed again, and arrows fell towards them once more, pinging off the crate as they bunkered down behind it. The forerunners had grabbed side arms – small personal defense weapons that fit in hand and rested back along the lower arm. They served as hybrids, small beam weapons, and close-quarters weapons akin to earth tonfas. As they each gripped the weapons, the arrows stopped, and the first of the riders was on their crate, curved blade raised high.

Alma raised her hand, a stolen arrow lashing out and piercing his sword arm. The creature let out a scream and fell back, but before he had, two more appeared.

Ashkii fired his sidearm, a silver lance of plasma ripping through one of the riders' legs. Another scream, and it fell. He heard another bolt fire, another creature scream – but more were on them. He caught a sword strike with the tonfa like portion of the weapon and fell back away from another. Alma was on her back foot already. There were too many of them for the two of them to hold out long.

Their feeling of panic quickly changed, though.

“Hey! Aliens!” Nami’s voice echoed through the cargo hold as she appeared from the ship with a bluster that could have only been matched by her brother. She wanted their attention, and she would have it. She hadn’t stood idly. She had raced out of the corridor, leaped from the ship, a flare of nanite mist propelling her across the distance in mere seconds. She landed hard, dust and dirt blowing out from around her in a small shockwave, coming to a stop next to one of the riders with a bow attempting to circle the shuttle to get a line of sight on the two.

The poor beast had turned for only a second to see her when a shimmering silver fist smashed into his chest. The extra force from the nanite infusion sent the forward rider meters, slamming against the shuttle with a sickening thud. Those not engaged with Alma and Ashkii were quick to realize there was a new threat, “No one touches any more of my family today.” She turned and pointed to the leader, who was still on his horse. “You look like you’re in charge – surrender.”

The creature didn’t understand her in the least. He and another couple of riders quickly turned towards her with bows drawn – but she pushed off from the dirt again with incredible speed, racing towards the leader. Her leg arched wide as she traveled, leaving a trail of silver mist behind it as she spun into a kick that came down on his riding beast with enough force to knock it off its legs, and the creature crumbled to the ground, and its rider rolled across the dirt helplessly. His closest men rushed at her with swords drawn. She moved swiftly, dodging to the side and catching the back of his wrist with a free hand. Her fist hit his elbow hard, his arm going limp – before she twisted away from another strike and disabled the next attacker with a powerful kick to the knee.

Within a few seconds, the battle had turned. Ashkii and Alma were up on their feet, back to back with their weapons ready to defend, and a few riders injured on the ground around them. Ashkii called out, "The not lizard called us Orphans – might speak our language."

Nami nodded and darted to the frightened humanoid, grabbing him by the leather collar as the Riders started to try to regroup. The first to move towards her stopped when Ashkii fired a plasma shot at his feet. The angry twin pulled the antlered creature to her. "You understand me?"

The creature nodded.

"I don't have the patience for prisoners. Get your wounded and run like hell – understand?"

Again, the smaller antlered creature nodded.

The battle ended swiftly, and the riders gathered their wounded quickly and took back to the plains, with Nami and Ashkii watching them ride off as the sun finally set behind. Ashkii took a deep breath and glanced over to the tearstained face of his security officer. He started to say something when she kicked the ground, a rippling shockwave moving across the crash site towards some nearby rocks that had been unearthed in the crash. "I don't know who you are or why you just watched... but you better show yourselves." She barked.

Humanoid hands raised from behind the rocks, pushing aside some sort of primitive ghillie net that had been used to obscure them. "Not riders!" The voice called out, two antlered figures standing at the edge of the crash site, "Frightened scavengers."