

Chapter 06

“Scavengers?” Nami spoke coldly. She glanced over at Ashkii, who held up a hand.

“We didn’t kill any riders, only wounded and disabled them. We don’t mean you any harm,” Ashkii announced. “If you speak our language, we might be able to offer some sort of trade for information.”

The scavengers moved out from behind their hiding place; hands held high. They walked towards the crash site, and for the first time, they could see the two rather well. In the light, the two antlered creatures stood before the Orphans. They were roughly the same height as the humans, bipedal, two arms, two eyes – an instant familiarity came with these aspects. They had clear, human-like dimorphisms. The two forerunners could tell which was male and female from a glance.

There were crucial differences, though. The sharp ears and antlers which rose from behind them were the simplest to note. The presumed male of the two had more massive antlers, with more points, most arched back and away from his head, and following his face's general flow. The presumed female, on the other hand, had only short antlers ending in soft tips. Their eyes were larger than humans, too, with massive pupils and only small circles of color around the edges. Any whites were hidden away deeper in the socket if there. They looked larger in part due to the two's short noses, which were more set back against their faces.

Perhaps not evident at first, but much clearer now were their hooved feet. Cloven toes invoked the image of deer to Ashkii. The realization made him look back to their hands. Those too were non-human, three thick digits, a thumb-like digit, and two long fingers, each with a bit of a cloven nature where he would have expected fingernails on a human. He took a breath.

“Toss off any weapons...” Nami said as they got closer. She had spotted the long daggers each wore at their hip—these newcomers dressed like hunters. Simple, natural colored clothes and trousers – with thick hooded cloaks hung over their shoulders. They each wore one glove that covered their digits but not their thumbs – archer’s gloves, or their version most likely. They had been smart enough to leave their bows and arrows in their hiding place, though.

They drew the swords from simple scabbards and tossed them to the dirt in front of the forerunners.

“And the dagger in your... boot... legwarmer things,” Nami pointed to the presumed female, who wore leather greaves around her shins. The scavenger complied and pulled the dagger from its hiding place and tossed it with the other blades.

Their blades were both more primitive and less so than the riders, Ashkii noted. While the riders wielded thick, curved swords of iron or steel – these two bore bronze weapons. He would have described the riders as wielding something akin to scimitars or falchions, but these were much different. Straight, sharp blades meant for close quarter defense – like classical human short swords. He took a breath and stepped forward; his weapon still gripped tight in his hand.

“Satisfied, Nami?” He asked.

“Not at all, but go ahead. I’m watching every movement.”

“Scavengers – how is it you know our language?” Ashkii moved straight to the point.

The presumed male scavenger answered, “Our ancestors were traders... we brought supplies from the great forests to the Spire. The Children of the Gods gave us the Mist, made us Arkantor, like them.”

“Arkantor?” Ashkii stopped, “The riders used that term. What is it?”

“Mist wielder,” The scavenger said, pointing to the clenched fist of Nami, still wreathed in swirling silver nanite mists.

Nami and Ashkii both looked at him for a moment. It was clear what he meant. Someone had given their family, their ancestors, nanites. “You can use neoterics? Control your nanites?” Ashkii said quickly.

The creature shook his head, “I do not know those words – but we can... the Mist taught us the language of the Orfan so that we could trade. It aids our survival. I can create fire, clean water. My cousin,” He drifted his hand towards the other, “She is a healer.”

“A healer?” Nami perked up at the thought.

“Yes,” The cousin responded with a nod of her head. “I tend to our wounds, disease... keep us healthy while we scavenge.”

“Orfan,” Ashkii moved the subject, “That is your word for us – right? Orphans?”

“Yes – though we were told that only a few Orphans ever ventured out beyond the Spire,” The scavenger paused and looked at them with a quizzical glance, “But you... are not from the Spire, are you?”

The two scavengers became rapidly frightened. They had already been cautious, but their faces twisted to discomfort, and they started to step back. There was a slight change in the conversational tone as Ashkii answered, “We’re not sure. We’re from Pyrrha. If that is your Spire...”

The two seemed confused and worried before the cousin spoke up, “How can you not know what the Spire is?”

“We just got here,” Nami answered plainly.

The two scavengers seemed to come to the realization fully at roughly the same time. Both stepped back again, “You were the fire in the sky? The falling star?”

Ashkii gave a tenuous nod, “I suppose that is how you could describe it... our ship,” He motioned back to the craft, “Was damaged, and we crashed here.” He held out a hand, “I assure you, we mean no harm and are just trying to get reunited with our people.”

“We can’t help you. Just let us leave in peace,” The first of the scavengers nodded to them, the nod lowering to a long bow. The scavenger’s cousin soon followed his motions as they backed away.

“I don’t understand,” Ashkii spoke quickly, “We need information and are willing to trade for it.”

The offer of trade didn’t seem to phase the two; they stared at the ground and gave no further words to the forerunners. They seemed almost frozen in fear, unwilling to look up to the two that stood before them.

“Food...? Supplies...?” Ashkii offered. “There must be something we can give you in exchange for some information about this world.” Again, nothing. They were silent and fearful. Ashkii wasn’t sure what to do or to say. They stood and gave him no response, no sign that they were even listening. “If not... then you are free to go. I guess.” He finally relented.

The two stayed still a moment and then moved towards their weapons to pick them up, never looking up at the Orphans. When they had their belongings, they started to walk away, hurrying back towards their hiding place.

Nami let the mist drift away from her hand. “Healer... my brother is dying,” She called out. “Ashkii is telling the truth. If you can help us, help him, give us knowledge, we’ll repay the favor.”

The healer paused in her steps away, and she shook her head. “The Orphans don’t die – they’re reborn,” She spoke coldly, “Don’t lie to us.”

“We’re not lying. We aren’t reborn, we die – our nanites keep us alive, can rebuild us, but we don’t have enough to keep my brother alive.” Nami explained, “Nanites – what you call the mist...”

“Our healer has spent all he can,” Ashkii added, “We’re trying to get more, but we do not have a lot of time.”

The healer turned around and spoke, quoting something they did not understand, “They will come from the sky in fire, looking as we do, seeking knowledge and understanding of our world, and they will devour all that stands in their way. They will try charm and illusion, but when their insatiable hunger becomes too much, they will show true colors. Those from the darkest beyond, who have seen the End – they will bring you to oblivion.” It was clear that it was some sort of text, or creed, likely religious in origin. The familiarity unsettled Ashkii.

“We’re not...”

“That does sound like us, Captain,” Alma’s voice chimed in as she approached the conversation.

“Alma, not helpful,” Ashkii snapped at the engineer.

“Are we free to go?” The scavengers asked.

Ashkii nodded. “Thank you for the information,” He said, “If you change your mind about us, the offer stands,”

They didn't seem to understand that was an affirmative until Nami added, "Go," with a wave of her hand. It wasn't much, but it was enough for them. The scavengers hurried away from the crash site and to their hiding place. For a few swift moments, they took their belongings in hand and broke camp, then disappeared out into the night.

Nami fell to her knees after a moment, rocking back to rest on her feet and stare out into the darkened wilds. The other two were quiet until she sniffled, running a hand across her face. Her thumb ran below her eyes, wiping at the dried tears that she had been able to ignore during the fight. She looked away from her team members and gave a long growling sigh, "Too good to be true; I guess. A healer, my ass."

"Their culture probably doesn't hold the same values as ours. They seem like they're," The captain paused as he thought, "mid to late bronze or classical," Ashkii spoke as he glanced at Alma, "We're post-scarcity, transhumans – I don't think we can compare them to us fairly. I don't think they are used to the more powerful offering a hand in friendship."

"They really aren't," Alma added, "I had a thought, though."

"What's that?" Ashkii glanced at the engineer, "More helpful than the last few, I hope."

"Probably not," She admitted. "Those riders are likely going to come back more prepared. We can't leave Nagi and Rel here – even with Nami kicking ass. They could theoretically overwhelm us. With a shield up and the five of us, we could hold an entire army of them back – but as it is..."

"Right, the ship is more of a target than anything else," Ashkii spoke softly.

"Exactly."

"Just get to it, Alma," Nami groaned from the ground next to them.

"Fair – I think we can stabilize Nagi if we overload and blow Atalanta's main reactor," The engineer smirked.

"What?" Both Ashkii and Nami spoke as they stared back at her – Nami was the one that protested beyond that, "An uncontrolled overload of even a backup fusion generator would decimate kilometers worth of territory."

"No, not blow like explode..." Alma explained, holding her hands out, "Blow, like... overwork."

"Explain..."

"I can pull the cores from the vehicles, attached them to the main reactors in the, well..." She pointed to the front half of the ship, "Not cargo portion of the crash. Whatever energy is left in Atalanta can be used that way – we can powerup the stasis bay long enough to stabilize Nagi, and burn out all of 'Lanta's systems, so scavengers can't get to anything useful." The engineer tapped on her wrist a little bit, "The power systems aren't exactly compatible, so the sudden surge will start throwing out power relays and the like –

basically, it'll glass the ship's insides. But, stasis is protected from that kind of stuff anyway." She shrugged, "I'd have to run the math – and that would've been easier with Veda – but I think it's doable."

"Well," Ashkii turned towards Nami, "He's your next of kin – willing to take the risk?"

Nami nodded slowly, "I think so. If the math checks out."

"Alright. Well, until then, let's get to work on gathering supplies and making sure we have everything where it goes," Ashkii spoke with a nod back over towards the cargo area of the crash site. "Alma, you go do the math. Let Rel know the plan, and we'll get all the cargo we can salvage stored somewhere safe until then," The forerunner captain looked out into the dark, "And let's make it fast. I'd rather not be here when the riders decide to come back and try to claim the scavenger rights on this wreckage."

muselessbard.com