

Chapter 07

Ashkii and Nami had spent much of the night going through their cargo and salvaging what they could. Most of their supplies had been damaged or destroyed, but around midnight the two had found some worker nanite canisters and were able to unleash those on the damaged supplies. That would at least give them some nanite stores to help with everything they would likely need of them in the next few weeks. They had found a few crates of rations, cold storage crates with genetic samples of plants and animals, a few more weapons. All in all, it was a victorious feeling.

In the meantime, Alma had set out to do complex mathematics and make sure that her scheme could work. By the next morning, she seemed more confident in the plan, and the three began work on tearing apart their surviving or salvageable auxiliary craft. While a shuttle would have made the exploration of this world much more manageable, none of them thought that it would be worth losing one of their own if they could help it. There were doubts in all of their minds, to be sure.

By the time they had things set up, they had decided that they would run the cores sequentially, buy as much time as possible, and maybe even save a core to put back into one of the vehicles. The next morning came, and throughout, they worked running wires and rerouting power systems. This work carried on into the afternoon and evening. By then, all of them were exhausted.

The crew got some much-needed sleep – with Rel offering to stand watch over the crash site that night. The scientist's watch had spared him from the combat, but the stories of it seemed to bother him in ways they had not with the others. Something was off, and Aurelio admitted he didn't know what yet. He needed to dwell on it for a while. He wanted to go over it in his head, and standing watch would allow him to do that.

It was a cold night, and Rel sat at the end of the corridor – where the unsealed doors gave way to shattered metal and overlooked the long trench that their crash had dug out of the ground during its impact. They had come thousands of years and nearly as many light-years, only to end up stranded thanks to gravity. Despite their technology and advancements, physics' laws were still able to hit back when they didn't have time to work at bending them.

He watched the sky through the night and pondered on the big questions of the last few days. One truth that kept eating at him was the idea that two distinct species of aliens with identifiably humanoid traits had arisen on this world – at least two. All their study indicated that there would be no sentient aliens on a planet selected for colonization. All their guidelines from the times before Pyrrha had suggested that the universe was not abundant with sentient life. Yes, there had been aliens and even those that survived the great filters of evolution alongside humanity. But even those were scarce. Even then, only a handful of times had two independent species been found on the same world.

Each time he sat on the question for any time, he kept coming back to the same conclusion. It gnawed at him and sent his mind hoping for another solution, but he couldn't find any. There was only one path that evolution could have taken to come to this sort of situation. As the next morning rose and the crew began work again on setting up the stasis bay with more power, Rel brought it up.

"I've been thinking about the... species... the evolution of this planet," He spoke as he worked, but loud enough for the others working nearby to hear, "It shouldn't be possible. Not improbable. But impossible." He spoke, just talking out his thoughts. "Humanoid evolution is something that could arise naturally on its own, theoretically. It is an advantageous line of evolution... but, cervid and saurian species should not have humanoid characteristics – not familiar to us at least."

"A theory of the evolution of life on other worlds was that the beginnings of life came from meteorites. It isn't straightforward to get into... but, I think... there might be some merit to it," Rel spoke as he attached a wire to the stasis system from the jagged lines which they dragged across the floor. "If I were going to seed a world evolutionarily, I would send a lot of different species types."

"Wait," Nami spoke up, her head popping up over a toolkit, "You're saying you think this world was purposefully given multiple species to try to evolve a sentient one, and multiple took?"

"Yes... I mean, without..." Rel paused and sat up, talking with his hands a bit to calm himself down, "Without study and proof, I can't know. But... they were identifiably human-like to you. So, what else could it mean?"

"You think it was our probes? Something Pyrrha didn't want us to know about?" Ashkii asked without moving from his task.

"I... I don't think so..." Rel shrugged, "Pyrrha never lied to us. Even as kids, we knew Reverie was fake, that we were floating through space on an interstellar mission. All our training specifically said that they would seek worlds without life so that we wouldn't interfere with the evolution of this new world..." He shook his head, "Why would that be the lie they chose to tell? And if lying about that, why not tell us Reverie was real, or not admit to the weird active and idle time..."

"Maybe they wanted a backup plan? Seed the planet with probes – make sure life could survive there?" Nami returned to her work after the question.

"Maybe. But even so... it would take... millions, billions of years..." Rel sighed, "It doesn't make sense... to me."

"Me either," Ashkii spoke up with a shake of his head. "It complicates everything."

"And the gift of the mist," Rel added. "I'm our medical officer. That isn't something I know how to do or could even think of a way to do. Our neoterics are keyed to us – humans, I mean. So, are they part human? Or were the nanites modified?" He asked. "If either of those is true, how and why?"

"Alright, Rel, you're delving into too complex of questions," Alma interrupted, "And we're going to need all our brainpower here on the enormous amounts of non-compatible power we're about to feed

through an already damaged system in hopes of bringing one of us back from the dead, basically.” She took a breath, “So, can we continue this conversation after we’re finished with that?”

Rel nodded sheepishly in agreement.

“Alma, we’re trying; give us some credit,” Nami said quietly. “And Rel is probably smart enough to do both.”

“I’m all for the conversation – just after this nonsense,” Alma said quickly, “I actually think he has a point, but... I need to concentrate on not blowing this continent to hell and back, you know?”

“Noted, Alma... we’ll work a bit quieter,” Ashkii shook his head, a bit of sarcasm on his tongue with the statement, but the group did stop the chatter for a time. While it eventually returned, it was less severe—quiet quips and simple thoughts, rather than discussing what might have brought them this far. Hours passed as they worked, and day once again faded to night. They held off on the project for a time, though it would have been ready that night. They opted to start in the morning when travel would be easier if they needed to undertake a journey.

The night was quiet, uneventful, contemplative. Ashkii and Alma fell asleep almost instantly when the option became available, neither much for worrying. Nami and Rel had opted to take the various watches, and after a short bit of rest, there was one crucial question that weighed on Nami’s mind. When she came to relieve Rel and let him rest, she asked it.

“So, you really think that someone lied to us? That our whole vision of this thing is wrong?”

Rel glanced out into the night and the shimmering moonlight falling on the vast plains. He gave a little nod. “Probability is... well... a thing. Large numbers are hard to imagine... smaller ones harder...” He all but whispered. “Each odd thing raises more questions, lowers an already small probability... is it more likely that this world... the people on it... evolved in such a way...” He talked through, struggling a bit as she sat down next to him. “Or... is it more likely... that we, or someone like us... played a part?”

She nodded. “I don’t know the math,” She admitted as she pulled her knees up to her chest and watched the plains with him for a moment. “I don’t want Nagi to have...”

“He hasn’t,” Rel interrupted her. “He’s not gone yet. Even if he did die – he would have to protect us, not some idea of what this place should have been...” He sighed.

“Do you think Alma’s plan might work?” She asked quietly.

“It might,” He responded with a smile, “If it doesn’t... this world has healers, neoterics... I’ll keep him alive until I’m out of nanites.”

“We’ll find an answer. I don’t particularly want to lose either of you...” She admitted as a thought crossed her mind. She shook her head. “But if I did... I don’t know what this place would do to me.”

“What do you mean?”

Her hand flared with the silvery mist of her neoterics as she looked down at it. "I have a lot of power, compared to the people here. We all do..." She spoke quietly. "All of our norms, what we were raised to believe... how much could I hold on to if I was alone?" She let the mist fade, "And the longer I was alone, the harder it would be to hold on to each thread. Why not take what I need? What I want? I could make this world my own."

"Nami?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not thinking like that... but what if someone else had? If Pyrrha crashed like we did, a handful of people struggling to maintain it against all odds could give in. Right?" She paused, "I guess what I'm saying is that I can feel that anger and fear, and I think your hypothesis is right. Someone twisted this world."

The conversation faded, the night dragged on – but Rel opted to rest there near her, just in case. He did worry that she was worse off than she admitted, and he felt the drive to watch over the crew's mental health as much as their physical. But his rest wouldn't last too many hours.

The next morning came quickly. Rel was surprised when the sun woke him up, and at first worried that Nami was not there – that she had slipped off in the night. She hadn't, though. She sat right where she had when he fell asleep, watching the horizon and the shimmering sunbeams that pierced through the broken moon and rings of the world. She smiled at him when he woke up and pointed to the sky. "Birds are flocking that direction. I noticed a lot of animals moving that way too," Her point drifted down towards the horizon. "That's probably the direction of a river or body of water. A good place to start looking for answers, I would think."

Rel started to speak but never got the chance.

"Hey, you two," Alma's voice echoed down the corridor, "If we're going to try this, let's do it. How long can it take for raptor riders to get back here with more forces, hm?"

The captain protested her choice of words, but she was right. The two went back to the stasis bay to start their project – a last-ditch effort to get one of their team back up and in action. Or, maybe, at least able to buy them some time to find an answer. The four assembled in the stasis room talked over the plan for a moment, and then Nami opted to leave. Despite her general strength, she had no delusions that she would do anything but break down upon seeing the broken body of her brother. She headed back out to watch for danger.

After she had been gone a moment, Ashkii and Rel went to the cockpit to retrieve the critically wounded pilot. His body was twisted and broken, with silver lines of nanites holding parts of him together like some grotesque mechanical zombie. They had to move slowly and carefully and gave Alma ample warning when they were approaching so she could prep herself. It was hard for any of them to look at a friend in such poor condition, but he had saved them, and they were going to do their best to return the favor.

The two placed the crippled body on one of the beds – Nami’s, to be exact – and prepared. The lucky thing about having twins was that it was fully compatible with both with very little work. As soon as his body was secured, Alma flipped the proverbial switch and started up the auxiliary generators. There was the sound of a snap, a loud hiss as the wall lights in the room began to flicker back to existence. Within a moment or two, the lights were back up; the systems started to power back on. Detecting a body in a stasis bed, the ship immediately reacted, and a gray mist began to encapsulate the injured member of their team. It was a much-needed early success.

Rel quickly put himself next to the bed, putting his interlocked hands just above the wounded crewmate’s most damaged sections. His hands glowed with a silver light, and nanite mists began to drift from his hands to Nagi’s body. As the encapsulation started to cover the entire bed, it wrapped around the medical officer’s arms and took a gel-like form, allowing him to move while keeping the system sealed. A loud pop from a nearby corridor as the first of the power systems burst under the strain of the incompatible power sources.

There was a bit of hope as the scene unfolded, and Ashkii’s attention drifted from between Rel and Alma for the first few seconds. But then, a voice broke through.

“Warning – extreme structural damage detected,” Veda started, “Incompatible power sources detected. Power systems are operating...”

“Veda! No, shut down,” Ashkii ordered, “We need all the power we can get here.”

“Unable to comply,” Veda responded.

“What?”

“That’s not possible – Veda,” Alma barked, “You can’t say no to an order, disengage, and shut down immediately.” Another searing pop in the nearby corridors, then a hiss of vacuum as one of their power sources expelled the last of its energy. The engineer jumped over to another reactor, and while the power flickered, it never failed.

“Unable to comply.”

“Why the hell not?” Ashkii called out to the device as he moved towards a nearby console. He put his hand on the console, and the control panel melted to gel under his touch. He began to use the device, cycling through controls to try to access an override.

“Planetary scan was completed on the pilot’s request. Immediate evacuation required.”

“That’s impossible, Veda. The ship is destroyed – we know about the other...” Ashkii tried to explain as there was a creaking sound, growing louder and louder until the sound of shearing metal could be heard from the cockpit. At the same time, the next of their reactors failed with a loud hiss. Alma rushed to the last of the three and continued working.

“Guys, shut her down – I need more time, and she’s burning it up!” Rel yelled.

"I'm trying, I'm trying," Ashkii quickly spoke as he worked at the console, desperately trying to disconnect the AI as it continued.

"Planetary scans detected multiple sentient life forms..."

"I know, damn it, we met a bunch of them, and they tried to kill us," Ashkii spoke as he worked, finally perking up when he found the controls he needed. "Five seconds,"

"You're cutting it close, Ashkii,"

"I know, cutting her now," Ashkii responded as the panel he was working at shut off.

"Indications of Ark activity in the system," Those words came as he finished, the AI's voice twisting and distorting as she was manually cut off by the Forerunner.

"Did she just say Ark activity?" Alma's voice rose over the rising sounds of pops, searing power circuits, and creaking, overheated metals.

"That's not possible – right?" Rel responded over the sounds, his concentration split but never broken from his patient.

"It sure as hell shouldn't be," Ashkii responded, darting from the console over to Rel. He held out his hands as they began to twist with that same gray mist. "Where do you need me?"

"Follow behind my hands, let your nanites handle closing him up," Rel suggested.

Ashkii followed the suggestion, putting his hands into the gel-like covering of the stasis pod and tracking the medical officer's movements. They only had a short amount of time left, and with the sounds of the ship failing around them – systems began to fail again. There was a loud hiss, and the final power supply was burnt out. It took a few seconds for the power failure to cascade through the systems – and as in all things, the ship powered the stasis pods as long as it could.

But after a moment or two more, they were in the dark once again. The gel of the stasis pod faded to mist, and shimmering fell to the floor. The crew had bought all the time they could and looking down at the body of their pilot, and there were clear parts of him that were more nanite than human still – but at least he looked like he was in one piece. The captain and medical officer let their neoterics quiet, the mists fading away from the body. Ashkii took a breath and shook his head.

"How much time did that buy us?" Ashkii asked Rel with a sigh.

"How much time did what buy us, boss?" The pilot's hoarse voice rose from the bed.