

## Chapter 08

There was a moment of pause as they realized the plan had worked. A moment of quiet shock, with the crew, astonished that Nagi had awoken. For the pilot, he seemed completely unaware that anything was wrong, that anything had happened. Nagi stared up at the others with a bit of confusion. As he glanced between the two figures above him, Alma finally moved – suddenly darting off down the corridor towards where Nami sat watch.

“Boss? What did I miss?” Nagi’s voice scratched out of his throat. His head twisted away from Ashkii, “Hey, Rel, miss me?” He teased with a wide smirk on his lips. The two watched in stunned silence for a few more seconds. The pilot started to get worried, “Okay. You two are starting to freak me out a little bit,”

“Nagi, you should save your energy...” Rel finally spoke in a quiet tone, erring on professional as much as he could. “...you were...”

“You saved the rest of us, Nagi – but Atalanta didn’t make it,” Ashkii added softly, “We crashed. You were in the cockpit and,”

“And died,” Nagi nodded, irreverent and somewhat snarky in his response, “I know – or, suspected. I was bleeding out when I blacked out, so I kind of thought that was going to be it.” He tried to shrug, but all that happened was his shoulders and arms quivered lightly. He chuckled, “Guess I’m not alive yet.”

“The...” Rel started, but his stutter was giving him trouble, “The nanites... helped... but you aren’t put... back together... yet.”

“But most of me seems to be here,” Nagi spoke with a sigh; his voice didn’t seem to be getting any better. “Well, can’t check the fun parts.”

“This is serious, Nagi,” Rel protested, resting a hand on the pilot’s shoulder.

The pilot smiled softly, “I know,” He admitted, “That’s why I can’t take it seriously,” He replied softly. The sound of running in the corridor echoed and grew closer every second.

Nami burst through the gateway with a bittersweet, “Nagi!” before she darted to the side of the bed and leaned in to give her brother a tearful hug. He couldn’t return the affection, not beyond a slight shrug of his arms to try to raise and meet her – but his body was not ready for that yet. “Are you?”

“Well, I’m not dead,” He answered with a whispering and scratchy voice, “But not sure beyond that yet...”

“He’s going to need time to recover and more treatments...” Rel nodded to the others as he stepped away from the table, letting his hand drift off the patient as he took a soft breath. “We’ll need to find more power... or another option,”

Ashkii nodded, "Maybe better luck in a town."

"Town?" Nagi said quietly, a quizzical brow trying to raise, "Seriously... what did I miss? How long was I out?"

"Ugh, yeah," Ashkii groaned. "There are people here – raptors people and folks with antlers that we've met so far. Maybe classical era tech."

The pilot nodded slightly and gave a little smirk before choking out a quiet, "Neat."

The rest of the crew gave small laughs, and Ashkii shook his head a bit, "Yeah, exactly. I'll let you rest and," He shrugged, "Catch up, I suppose. Alma and I will get something together for travel." He said with a nod before stepping away.

For some reason, he felt it best to leave the three alone to let them celebrate. As close as the five of them could get, Alma had always been standoffish and more set on her goals. Ashkii had always wanted to move forward; he still had to be first out of the gate. Ashkii felt like this might be one of those times. They had to move on, and he didn't feel there was enough time to celebrate their success, no matter how big it was.

A few moments of contemplation later, he had found his way out to Alma, who was cataloging their supplies. They didn't have a lot - sidearm for each of them, about a month's worth of rations and emergency rations, general survival equipment. The two talked over how to handle Nagi if he wasn't going to be able to move, and the only option they found was an old cargo lift. They set about working on that project together, quietly refitting the levitating repulse-lift device with a broader base and loaded it with their supplies. The device hovered only a bit over the ground, provided no thrust of its own, but it would at least let them keep supplies and Nagi with them as they traveled without having to struggle to make more archaic sleds.

The next order of business felt strange, given everything they had been through so far. But it was necessary. It got cold on this planet at night, and they had no clue about weather patterns. The crisp white clothes they wore now, basically undershirts and shorts, were unacceptable for travel. So, Ashkii headed back into the ship to find their actual survival clothes. It took him a bit of searching through damaged rooms, but he eventually found what he was looking for and paused.

They were supposed to be explorers. This was the one thing they were trained to do; the gear they would be wearing was essential. In this case, it was almost like a uniform for them. For the first time, he felt like he had found something that would bring them some sense of normality. Maybe. He couldn't be sure. But for him, just the act of putting on his survival gear gave him a feeling of control and calmed that he hadn't been able to find since waking up.

He felt a bit odd even thinking it, but the act of dressing in this gear helped center him. Thick socks, dark cargo pants, long-sleeved dark undershirt – putting each on made was the beginning of a ritual he had forgotten about since waking. He pulled the shirt down over his chest, being careful to avoid catching the fabric on the ports that once connected him to stasis – which his nanites were diligently stitching up and closing as swiftly as they could.

He took a breath as he pulled on a thick overshirt next. Then he took the time to set up his belt, small hard fabric bags taking a minute to slip through various loops. He laced up a pair of high boots, attached thin and sturdy kneepads and elbow pads – all of which were laced with their unique style of nanites to absorb shock and hard hits. He had expected them to be useful for survival but now had to admit he was glad to know their jackets and pants were laced with similar materials. They were not as helpful as full-on armor, but they might keep them safe from the primitive weapons of this world.

He stared at the jacket – one of the final objects to put on. It was dark in color, something he was used to wearing, but it looked like so much more now. It was a lifeline, a connection to their home. On one shoulder was the patch Veda had designed for them – a simple minimalist spearhead, flight lines trailing behind it, over a red starburst. On the other shoulder was the patch of the Pyrrha itself – the red starburst, with the Greek text “Πύρρα” emblazoned under it.

There was a thought, a sudden and crippling realization that caused him to stand for a time. There was no need for an emblem like that if they were the only ones. He had thought that it had been a sort of call to community when he first saw it – that the red starburst was theirs. For now, though, there was doubt. If he had power, he would have questioned it. He would have sought some answer. Were there other ships? A reason for the identification of a home ship that they hadn't been told. He couldn't dwell on that now. He couldn't get answers to the questions without searching outward.

So, searching outward, it was.

He pulled on the jacket and zipped it up. Final touches included padded gloves, protective eyewear, and a classic and straightforward bucket hat to keep the sun off his neck. Once finished, he took a breath. Backpacks were out with the cargo. Alma was setting them up. He took a moment to think and then scooped up the remaining clothes. He headed towards the stasis chambers and found the three crewmembers talking and catching up with the injured pilot.

“Good, you all seem to be doing fine,” Ashkii said as he tossed the clothes on one of the free beds. “Suit up; we can't stay here long.”

The looks they gave him surprised him. Each seemed a bit relieved to see him in their version of a uniform. He saw that same thought he had to cross their minds. Exploration is what they were there for; this was normal. This was something they could tackle. There would be no more waiting around, no more standing still to see what came to them. They were moving out there to find answers for themselves.

“Yes, Captain – we'll be ready soon,” Nami said quickly, before adding, “And Nagi.”

“Him too,” Ashkii said with a nod, “He's going to explore if we have to drag him along behind us – and Alma's already got a lift ready for that.”

Nagi chuckled, “Good, I can keep an eye on where we've been...” He said before he darted. It was a sort of a flop as if he instinctively wanted to turn back more fully towards Ashkii but couldn't. “Oh, Ash, did you find my hard copy of the scan?”

“Your what?”

“Before the crash, I had Veda run a full planetary scan, trying to get a view of the land, any sign of the other Forerunners or Pyrrha. I knew she wouldn’t survive the crash, but...”

“Wait,” Rel spoke up, “That means...”

“...She wasn’t malfunctioning. She had detected Ark signatures.” Ashkii finished.

“Wait. What?” Nagi asked quickly.

“Veda was on while you were coming back too – with a bunch of warnings. We had to shut her off to get you back,” Rel explained.

“Nami, Rel – get ready faster. If there are Ark signatures here, they’ve almost certainly detected us after we powered back on,” Ashkii spoke with a shake of his head, “We need to be far away from here as soon as possible.”

He didn’t wait for a response but heard them give the affirmatives as he moved down the corridor towards the ship’s impromptu exit the crash had created. He leaned out the gateway and called out to his Engineer, “Alma! Go to stasis and get suited up,”

“Right – can do,” She called back.

“And where would a hard copy of a scan be sent if requested by the pilot just before impact?”

“Cockpit – black box systems are under between the stasis chamber and cockpit proper,” She responded as she began the climb up the broken ship towards him. “Why?”

“Veda was warning us. Nagi did a scan before the crash,” He spoke as he turned around and headed back down the corridor.

Ashkii passed through stasis as he moved towards the cockpit, the crew mid-change, and focused on their tasks at hand before starting to help Nagi with his dress. The captain found his way to the cockpit and stepped into the broken room, most of which had collapsed. There was a distinct, unsettling smell of blood and fire, and the copper color of stained metal from where the pilot had bled on their descent. He moved to wall panels and began to pull them off. His nanites did much of the work, breaking down stuck panels and breaking them down into parts to open up access to the so-called black box systems. There, he saw it.

There was a blinking light, a simple cartridge ejected from the system. Ashkii took hold of the cartridge and pulled it out of the hiding place. When it was free, the blinking stopped, and a hologram leaped to life in his hands. There was a scan of the world; the world as a whole laid out before him. Blinking areas of the scan showed that there were items of interest, but he held off.

He walked back to the stasis room where the crew was, and all of them turned to see the hologram as he entered. They stopped what they were doing and watched. He held it forward, and a silver mist formed around it and his hands. Once connected, he could control it.

The hologram expanded, and the world was laid out before them, spinning lightly to show the planet and its continents, complete with estimated biomes. After a moment, symbols began to appear in places, highlighting things that should not have existed; cities, monuments, artificial things. The emblem of the Atalanta appeared near the center of one continent and at the very edge of that same continent was another emblem. It turned out he had been right when he began to worry about the patch. There were others out there.

In a southern bay, beyond this vast steppe, the mountains that shielded it and the wilds between the mountains and the sea was an emblem eerily similar to Pyrrha's. But where Pyrrha was red, this one was blue, emblazoned with the name "Δευκαλίων."

Deucalion.

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