

## **Apocalypse 571**

### Chapter 571 Search And Rescue Mission 7

At last, they reached their destination. Just a few meters from the edge of the forest, the rice stalks stood untouched, swaying gently in the breeze as if no one had passed through.

There were no signs of a struggle, no footprints or disturbances—nothing to suggest anyone had ventured this way.

The air hung thick with stillness, an eerie calm that felt almost unnatural. For a brief, unsettling moment, it was as if the world itself had paused, holding its breath in anticipation.

When Kisha, Duke, and Vulture laid eyes on the object on the ground, a collective sigh of relief escaped their lips. It was as if the weight of a boulder pressing down on their hearts had suddenly lifted, and the suffocating tension that had held them captive melted away—at least, for a fleeting moment.

But as they crouched down to inspect the item, their relief shattered like glass. Their hearts sank, and their minds spun into chaos as they realized what they were staring at: there was no sign of Sparrow's body. Instead, only a bloodied radio lay discarded on the ground.

A crushing silence filled the air, and for a moment, they were frozen. But then, a small thread of hope flickered. The absence of his body could also mean one thing—he might still be alive. They clung to that fragile hope, unwilling to let go.

Sparrow had been one of their core members, a true part of their family. Kisha, Duke, and Vulture all felt the same—losing him was unimaginable. The thought was too heavy to bear. Duke's voice cracked, hoarse with emotion as he spoke, "He might be around."

It was unclear whether he meant they should search for him, or if he was unwilling to accept the possibility that Sparrow was no longer alive.

Kisha nodded absently, her mind racing. But as if trying to deny the truth, Vulture pulled out his walkie-talkie and tried to contact Sparrow's, hoping for a response.

Instead, it was the crackle of the walkie-talkie on Duke's hand that filled the air, followed by a tense silence as the connection went through. Vulture's words faltered, stuck in his throat.

The oppressive stillness hung around them like a shroud. They didn't need to say anything more. The truth had settled in—there was no denying that the bloodied radio on the ground belonged to Sparrow. Any hope of it being someone else, or clinging to excuses, had vanished.

With a heavy heart and his mind in turmoil, Vulture's hand dropped limply to his side. His radio slipped from his grasp, landing softly among the dry leaves of the golden rice stalks, the faint rustling sound amplifying the silence that followed. A sob escaped his lips, raw and unrestrained.

"We need to find him," he whispered, his voice trembling with a desperate plea. The words were filled with anguish, but no one could fault him; they were just as consumed with worry for Sparrow.

As if jolted back to reality, Kisha suddenly spoke up, her voice cutting through the tension.

"Wait," Kisha said, her voice tinged with uncertainty. "If the blood trail led to this spot, where Sparrow was supposed to be, but he's nowhere around... doesn't that seem a bit off?"

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but a nagging feeling settled in her gut. Something didn't add up, and she couldn't shake the sense that they were overlooking something important.

"What do you mean?" Duke asked, his gaze drawn to Kisha's face, her features now marred by a frown.

Though the night vision goggles obscured much of her expression, casting a shadow over her face as they hung loosely atop her head, the furrow in her brow was unmistakable.

She had lifted the goggles to get a clearer view of the item, but the crease between her eyebrows told him everything. Duke could tell that Kisha was puzzled, something weighing on her mind.

"What if the trail we've been following isn't leading to where Sparrow is, but to where he was supposed to be heading to escape?" Kisha suggested, her voice steady but tinged with doubt.

She scanned the surroundings once more. "I've noticed since earlier that there's no other trail here. And even if Sparrow used his wind ability to glide, he still doesn't have the power to fly. He can only jump long distances, the wind carrying him farther, but he'd still need to land somewhere."

She paused for a moment before continuing. "I sent the Scarlet Bees to search the area, but there's nothing. No trail left. Everything stops here."

As if Duke was finally catching onto her line of thought, he continued her reasoning. "And the way this walkie-talkie looks—it seems like it was dropped from above, not something he would've dropped as he came down. There's no sign that he landed here."

A sudden realization struck Duke, and he quickly turned to Kisha, his eyes wide with shock. "Do you think he was attacked from above before he had a chance to land? Maybe he was dragged away, and the walkie-talkie just... fell?"

Kisha hesitated, then added, her voice laced with a hint of hope, "Or maybe he was trying to leave us a clue."

Though they were both uncertain, one thing was clear: Sparrow had been attacked from above before he had a chance to land. He had been fleeing from something—and that something was the reason he was missing. If the creature that attacked him was a flying one, they'd need to find its nest.

But if they were unlucky and the creature had fledglings, it would mean that Sparrow was either already eaten or thrown to the young ones.

Kisha recoiled at the thought, unwilling to let her mind go down that path. The idea that he might already be dead, with no chance of survival, was too much for her to bear and it would feel like she was already ending his chance of survival without even finding out the truth.

Kisha's heart pounded violently in her chest as she glanced back at the path they had come from.

Duke, his voice steady but tinged with concern, spoke up. "I think we need to retrace our steps. If he was really attacked and this blood trail isn't small, it means Sparrow was badly injured. If he was attacked

from above and dragged away, then we're following the blood trail in reverse. He might've been taken deeper into the forest."

Duke analyzed the situation with a clear, focused gaze, his eyes flicking back toward their starting point.

Kisha met his look, a silent understanding passing between them. Without another word, they both stood up. Kisha carefully placed Sparrow's walkie-talkie into her inventory, the weight of the situation settling heavily between them.

As they moved forward, Kisha and Duke both noticed that Vulture remained frozen in place, his body stiff and unyielding, as if he had already lost his soul and was silently grieving the loss of his brother.

Duke stepped closer to him, his expression hardening. Without a word, he raised his hand and—

Slap!

The sharp sound of the slap cut through the air, echoing the tension that hung between them. Duke's hand stung, and he looked at it, his fingers numb from the force of the strike. 'It's alright,' he told himself, his mind steadying. 'He's got thick skin. He won't feel it.' But still, it felt like he had struck metal.