Chapter 102

The heat was all Baas could think about. He wondered if maybe he should be thinking about something else. Maybe a way to defeat the Discretes, perhaps the safety of Vanessa... but no, he was thinking about just how hot it is.

“Are we there yet?”

Everyone in the company sighed. It had been about four days since they left Serho. The horse had been able to carry them for about an hour before Atsuma stopped it. Ordering everyone to get off, Atsuma let the horse go on its own. Everyone was confused at first as to why as Serho made the journey much easier, but Atsuma didn’t want to risk tiring out the horse. When the health of the horse was brought up, the complaints ceased. No one wanted to keep going at the risk of injuring Serho. With that, the horse began to make his way home while the quartet had to make the rest of the journey by themselves. The walk itself wasn’t too bad as each individual had been in worse physical situations and there was some places to stop for food and water along the way. The problems occurred whenever Baas started getting bored.

“Baas.” Atsuma said trying to calm himself. “We’re all hot and tired, can you please not make the situation more annoying?”

“I assume the question is rhetorical, and yet I am so anxious to answer it.”

Atsuma moaned loudly.

“I can’t help it Atsuma, I’m bored. And why is it so hot? We’re in a forest, they’re generally cool.”

“It’s hot because we’re nearing the area where the cliffs are. The land isn’t a forest there, but a desert. Just dirt and sun. You might get a few stubborn plants, but it’s not a place for Blues.”

“Atsuma” Pandora suddenly came in. “We’re here.”

“CLIFFS HO!” Koroko screamed.

In the distance, farther than anyone but Pandora and Baas could see, the mass of trees was interrupted by a sudden patch of dirt. And shortly after that dirt, a series of cliffs that barely rose from the ground made their way into existence.

As the group began to exit the blanket of trees, Baas beheld the site. Never had he seen such anything like it. Immediately he stopped and headed back to the forest. Finding a tree, he immediately made his way up... and fell. Figuring out what he did wrong, the teenager tried once again and this time made it to the top. Doing so allowed him to see what he wanted. As far as his eyes could see, the ground looked as though someone took a humongous sword and randomly carved out huge crevices.

“Wig-Or-Log is broken!” Baas said excitedly. “But I thought that cliffs were supposed to be huge. The lands barely rise from the ground.”

“The walls may not be huge, but the holes in between them are deep. So deep, that if you fall down one, you’ll never come out.” Koroko teased. He felt a sudden jab on the side of his elbow. He was about to complain to Pandora, when she pointed to Atsuma showing why she had done it. Baas took note of the activities as he climbed down the tree. The group began walking towards the cliffs as Baas’ mind began to ponder. He looked back at the forest behind them. He looked forward at the walls they were walking to. Then, he looked to his left at a dead tree.

“Oh my goodness.” Baas realized as his eyes widened. “This is the spot, isn’t it?” Immediately after asking the question, Baas regretted doing so. He could see what pain it brought Atsuma.\

“Yeah Baas.” Atsuma said low and serious. “This is the spot where she fell. This is the spot where I shot and killed her.”

Baas held his head down. It was true that Atsuma had told him he didn’t mind talking about Arttior, but Baas knew he didn’t like to be reminded how she had died. The group was silent the rest of the way toward the cliffs. Baas tried to think of something to say something to cheer his friend up. Trying doesn’t always work in Baas’ case. He had already messed up by reminding Atsuma how he had killed his own wife; anything else said might make the situation worse.

After what seemed to Baas like forever, the group finally arrived to the first crevice in the cliffs of Wig.

“So this is where the Center is.” Atsuma glanced around. “Right under everyone’s nose the whole time.”

“Well, if we read that map correctly.” Baas added. “Otherwise we’ll have to start our search from scratch.”

“You have a knack for saying the absolute wrong thing, you know that?” Koroko asked.

“Yeah.” Baas smiled “I can be a bit of a moron.”

Moron. The word rang a bell in the memory of Baas.

“Moron. Moron. MORON! Oh no, we forgot Vatti!”

Atsuma raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah, how bout that.”

“We gotta go back and...”

“Whoa whoa whoa. Before you go crazy on insisting why we need to go back, let me explain to you three good reasons why that’s a bad idea. One, it took us four days to get here, without Serho, it’ll take us a week to get back.”

“But...”

“TWO! We are black bands now. We set one foot inside of Orange base, and we are dead. We won’t be able to get to your friend.”

“Yeah but...”

“AND THREE! It’s safer there for your friend than it is here. I told Eltin to let her and Henry join Orange. They’re not in danger. Do you really want to take her away from that and bring her here where she’ll die?”

Baas grew quiet. “N...no.” It was true that he wanted to be with Vatti, but not if it meant her dying. The length and danger of the journey didn’t bother him, but the thought of Vatti’s safety did.

\*grrrrrrrr\*

Everyone grew quiet after hearing that noise.

“Panda! Say ‘excuse me!’”

“That wasn’t me!”

“No.” Atsuma’s eyes shifted. “I know that sound.”

Before Atsuma could finish explaining, giant masses emerged from the crevice the team was standing next to. The Leaders and Near, all used to reacting with their legs, jumped out of the way. Pandora, however, was pounced upon by one of the four beasts. Rolling around after being hit was the only surefire way to keep the animal as frazzled as she was. “Panda!” Atsuma called out, but he didn’t have time to save her. The other three attackers, after missing, began to face down their prey. Now that they were still, Baas had time to examine them. They had snarling snouts with horrifyingly sharp teeth. The whites of their eyes weren’t white at all, but yellow. The pupils... well those varied. The one that was targeting Baas had red eyes. The irises were thin. Baas remembered vaguely that that meant something, but his fear was grasping him more so than his intrigue. The teeth were their most threatening weapon, but Baas noticed it wasn’t their only one. The hair that was on their body... their fur, it was stiff. Sticking out as though if they charged someone, it would end fatal for the prey.

“What are these things?” Baas shouted.

“Stirkfurs.” Atsuma said intently.

Stirkfurs. That meant something important, but Baas’s mind couldn’t focus. This stirkfur was staring him dead in the eyes, and he didn’t like it. Its pattern said it all. It would strike him. It would kill him. Baas saw only one option. Before anyone could act, Baas turned around and ran.

“Baas, no! Don’t run!” Atsuma cried out, but his words were too late. The creature that had been staring down Baas took off after him. Atsuma was stressed. The first rule of facing a stirkfur is to never run away from it. Even if one had the leg strength to get ahead, which was highly unlikely, they would get tired and would eventually get caught. Atsuma wanted to run after Baas and help him, but doing so would cause his own stirkfur to do the same to him. He had no choice but to hope Baas would hold off until he could deal with his own problem.

“Bad sturkfir, bad!” Baas shouted as he ran. “I don’t wanna play anymore! Leave me alone!” The beast showed no sign that it was paying attention to what Baas was saying. Baas ran as fast as his legs would push him. They kept him ahead, but that just meant the creature stayed a certain distance behind him. Baas kept going, but his straight path was coming to an end. The desert ended at the forest. There was no way Baas was gonna let trees end his running away from pure evil! Lifting his right hand, he threw his sword forward into the tree. With the sword sticking out of the trunk, Baas charged. Timing his leap just right, the youth left the floor allowing his other foot to land on the handle of the sword. Once there, he had the footing to continuing leaping up the tree. He made his way to the canopy of the tree, trying to get to a place the stirkfur could not follow. Trying tends to work in Baas’ case, as while the beast jumped up to climb, it failed in getting up the tree. Baas was intrigued. It wasn’t that the stirkfur didn’t have the potential to get up the tree, but that it couldn’t figure out how. Its legs would grasp the tree, but it never shifted its weight properly.

Baas let out large grasps of air. Now that he was a safe distance away from the creature, his mind began to slow and his fear began to decrease. Soon, a smile made its way across his face.

“Nyan nyan!” Baas mocked the stirkfur. “That’s what you get trying to eat the awesomeness that is Baas!”

Understanding that it was being taunted, the stirkfur again tried to climb the tree and lunge at Baas. Again it failed.

“Come on, you can do it. One more try!”

Another failure.

“You’ll never do it with that stance!”

Failure once more.

“Geeze, I’m starting to get bored.” Baas took his attention off his own stirkfur and began to observe the group he had left behind. Koroko and Atsuma were on it. Each facing down his own deadly stirkfur. Both were waiting... then defending... then attacking... slowly wearing down their individual beasts until finally Atsuma’s pressed his sword into the soft belly of his foe. Immediately after, Koroko was able to deal a final blow across his adversary’s snout. Breathing hard, the two had been able to finish their foes. But... something wasn’t right.

“Okay.” Atsuma spoke up. “Let’s take care of the one that ran after Baas. With both of us, it might just decide to...”

“AHH!”

Everyone quickly turned their necks to see exactly where the sound had come from. Across the giant hole in the land, Pandora was being attacked by her own stirkfur. The path she was on wasn’t too wide and it took all the Far’s concentration to keep her from losing her footing. The stirkfur, however, seemed to be perfectly balanced.

“Panda!” Koroko cried out. “How’d you get over there!?!”

“THAT’S NOT IMPORTANT! COME HELP ME!” Pandora screamed as loud as she could.

“What’s the matter? Just use your...” And suddenly everyone realized. Pandora was bowless. Koroko’s eyes were the first to spot it. As fast as he could move, the Near ran and grabbed it. He was about to throw it across to his friend, when he realized she was in no condition to even attempt to catch it. Even if she could, using it in the way she was would be impossible even for Panda. But he had to do something. Pandora was either gonna fall or be a meal any second. If there was some way across, he’d just go over and help her, but the bridge to getting across was too far. Finally, another idea hit Koroko.

“Atsuma” He called to the Leader. “Catch!” Koroko tossed the Stirkfur bow to Atsuma. Without thinking, Atsuma let out his hand and caught the bow.

“ATSUMAAAAA!”

Immediately images and sounds rushed through Atsuma’s head. The feeling of the bow in his hand, the thought of the action he had done, the sight of his wife. They all instantly brought Atsuma to his knees. Tears formed in his eyes, sweat came down his brow...

“Arty…” he said low.

“Oh no.” Koroko groaned.

“Ahh!”

But there was no time for groaning.

“Ats. Get a hold of yourself!”

“Arty. I’m sorry.”

“Atsuma, I know you’ve got issues you’ve got to deal with, but we don’t have time for that.”

“Arty...”

“Arty is dead, Ats! She’s dead! It happened ten years ago! But Panda is over there now! We can’t get to her, but you know how to use a bow.”

“I can’t... I can’t...”

“ATSUMA IF YOU DON’T DO SOMETHING, PANDA’S GONNA DIE!”

Atsuma stayed on his knees shaking. Koroko grasped his fist.

“WAKE UP, ATS!”

\*pow\*

Koroko’s fist came across Atsuma face hard and sent his body flying a couple of feet over. As he laid their on the floor, Atsuma thought... clearly. He knew... he knew where he was. He knew who was with him. He felt the Stirkfur in his hand. He felt his body; it wasn’t shaking. Analysis, it’s what they trained him to do best at the Center. But there was no time for that. Atsuma stood up quickly. He saw Pandora, he saw the stirkfur. Faster than Koroko could figure, the Leader grabbed one of the arrows on the ground, placed it in the bow and drew back. Despite the time that had flown by since he had used one, despite the tension that was going on, Atsuma’s body still knew what to do. He waited... took precious aim... and then... he fired.

\*Arf\*

The arrow found its target of the stirkfur’s neck. Ill-prepared, the sudden force upon its body knocked the stirkfur off balance, making it plummet off the cliff down to into darkness. Pandora wasn’t sure what was louder, her lungs or her heart. That had been too close for comfort.

“Atsuma.” Koroko almost yelled. “You did it!”

“Yeah...” Atsuma said stunned. “Yeah, I really did. It’s weird. I’m still holding this thing, but... the stress is gone. It’s like when you punched me, you knocked the memory out or something.”

“Logic.” Koroko smiled.

“Hey guys!” Pandora yelled across the crevice. “Aren’t you two forgetting something?” Her finger pointed passed the two towards the forest.

“Oh Baas, that’s right!”

Atsuma quickly got up and ran towards the forest they came from. At full speed, it took him about 30 seconds to arrive where Baas was. However, there was no stirkfur, only Baas climbing down a tree.

“Baas, where’d the stirkfur go?”

Baas reached the bottom of the tree.

“He got bored and left.”

“Got bored?”

“Yeah, I climbed this tree and he couldn’t get me. Turns out stirkfurs aren’t good at climbing trees, which is weird since they can apparently climb cliffs very well. That one fell on his back leg and limped off.”

“Do you know where?”

“Somewhere in the forest.”

Atsuma pumped his fist.

“Well that’s not good. If we don’t kill him now, he could come back for us later.”

“I don’t know, I think they’d make good friends they didn’t think we were ene... Wait, you killed the other ones?”

“Of course, they were trying to kill us!”

“Well... yeah... I guess that’s true.”

The two headed over towards their other comrades. By then, Pandora had made her way back to Koroko.

“So,” Koroko sighed, “now that that completely pointless adventure is over, where do we start our search?”

“The cliffs are filled with caves.” Atsuma answered. “Guess we’ve got no choice but to check each and every cliff wall.”

“What?” Baas almost screamed. “What about the stirkfurs?”

“We can handle a couple of stirkfurs kid, so long as they don’t catch us by surprise.”

“Not to mention the stirkfurs don’t live on the surface of the cliffs. They were driven to the deep parts of the cliffs by the Discretes. They only pop up every now and again. They usually don’t get past Oranges, especially since we use their fur to make our bows.”

Baas looked over the edge of the cliff into what seemed like a bottomless pit. “I can’t see the bottom. There must be no light at all towards the bottom because the cliffs are so close to each other. The stirkfurs must’ve adapted to thrive there. They can probably sense through the darkness and climb the walls easily.”

“Or they use the trails.” Pandora said.

“Trails?”

“Yeah, there are trails you can walk all along the edge of the cliffs. They go down into the darkness as well, but no one ever goes down there because of the animals.”

“No one?”

“Why would anyone?” Atsuma asked. “Yeah they come out here on the surface thinking that they can spy on Orange, but there’s no advantage to going to the depths of it. There’s no light, no good territory and the stirkfurs alone would get you, not to mention what else might be lurking down there.”

“That’s... very interesting.” Baas said. He put his hand to his chin as though signifying he was thinking. His feet started walking around with no clear direction.

“What are you thinking about Baas?” Pandora asked

“The map we found said that this place was ‘home,’ signifying that this might be where the Center is. That was possible, seeing as how the Cliffs of Wig are a place that nobody visits.”

“Duh, we figured that out already.” Koroko groaned.

“But, that’s not entirely true. People do visit the Cliffs, but they do so very scarcely. People hide out in the caves from time to time. Yet in all the times that they’ve come here to spy, and in all the times Oranges have come here to scout and hunt, no one has seen any sign of the Center.”

“They probably just didn’t search the right place.” Atsuma pointed out.

“That’s possible.” Baas said. “But let’s say they got close. It’d make sense that the Discretes would do something to ward them away considering they don’t want anyone finding the Center. I mean, don’t Oranges get defensive whenever an enemy gets to close to the base?”

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

“True.” Was all Atsuma said.

“So the cliffs of Wig may not be the ideal location for someone to come snooping around, but it’s still open; it’s still public. Anyone can go to it and people do. According to Diablo’s tale, that’s not the Discrete’s style. And think about the Center. With the exception of a couple of rooms with holes in the ceiling, it was always dark. We wouldn’t have known what sun was if it hadn’t been for those rooms. Not exactly some places you’d expect to find here.”

“So what, you think we’re looking in the wrong place? That the Center isn’t in the Cliffs of Wig?” Koroko asked.

“Well... yes and no.” Baas answered, still pondering. “The cliffs are still open and people aren’t generally scared enough that they won’t eventually explore them, so I want to conclude that this couldn’t possibly be the right place, but what’s stopping me are the trails. There are trails all over the walls, they may not be very neat, but people can indeed travel along this place simply by walking. Humans had to have been here and made this their environment. So either someone long ago used these paths... or the Discretes are here.”

“Okay, so we’re back to square one.” Atsuma said. “We start searching the caves. The people here probably got close but the Discretes didn’t reveal themselves because it would’ve given them away.”

“No.” Baas said shaking his head. “It’s still too risky. Even if that did happen once, they would’ve found a way to make it safer for them to do their activities.”

“Baas, will you stop dancing around the answer and just tell us?”

Baas looked up. “Huh? Oh right. Sorry. What I’m saying is that the trails show that this is indeed the place for the Discretes, but it’s too open. However, there’s a convenient spot right under everyone’s nose. The depths of the cliffs. It’s dark, has absolutely no value to it and is supposedly filled with dangerous animals. If you even get close, stirkfurs come out and attack you. No one will go down there, no matter how brave they’re feeling…”

“…which makes it the perfect place for an organization that never wants to be found.” Atsuma finished, getting excited.

“That’s why no one ever been able to find the Center.” Koroko jumped in. “It was never in Wig-Or-Log.”

“It was underneath it.” Baas finished.

Chapter 102 End