Chapter 103: Welcome Home

“They say, that in the pits where no one can see. The stirkfurs like to come out and gobble little Fars.” Koroko teased.

“They also say, that Pandoras are known to attack Korokos when stirred.” Pandora sneered back.

As Baas had suggested, the group made their way down into the depths of the Cliffs of Wig. Surprisingly, it wasn’t completely dark, but still incredibly difficult to see. Now that they were off the walls and on the ground, the team was wondering around randomly, hoping to find... something.

“Guys. We’re sneaking into what is probably enemy territory.” Atsuma pointed out. “Even if the Discretes aren’t here, stirkfurs are, so you may want to keep it down.”

“Tell that to mister scary story back here.” Pandora couldn’t see him, but she could tell Koroko was making some kind of face at her.

“I’m telling it to both of you. We can’t see a thing. For all we know, we could be surrounded right now.”

Baas gave a confused look that no one could see. “What are you talking about Atsuma? We’re not surrounded. I don’t hear or see anything.”

“That’s cause it’s dark Baas.”

“Yeah, but we can still see.”

“I think Baas’ eyes have adjusted faster than ours, Atsuma.” Pandora pointed out.

“Oh great.” Koroko groaned. “Another perk of being a Discrete. Isn’t there anything you people don’t get handed for free?”

“That explains why we haven’t been just wondering around or running into walls.” Atsuma thought outloud. “Baas has been leading us this whole time.”

“Well, I am a Leader.”

“Says the black band.”

Baas had no come back for that. Instead he just continued his way forward. The team traveled for what seemed like another hour. By then, everyone’s eyes had adjusted to extreme darkness enough that they could make out where walls were.

“Hey, there’s a light up ahead.” Baas wanted to hide somewhere, but there wasn’t much place he thought was safe. Besides, there may have been a light but there wasn’t any shadows. Once the group got to the light, they discovered that it was lantern hanging from the ceiling.

“Well,” Atsuma sighed. “There’s definitely people down here.”

“That or someone invented lantern oil that burns for an EXTREMELY long time.”

A familiar scent suddenly hit Baas’ nose.

\*Sniff sniff\*

“Guys, do you smell that?”

Everyone took a whiff of the air.

“No.” Atsuma answered. “Why, what do you smell?”

“I’m not sure.” Baas thought, taking another whiff. “All I know is that I’ve smelled it before.”

Atsuma took another whiff. Still nothing. “Well, unless the smell will get us closer, keep moving. There’s more light up ahead. That probably means more lanterns.”

“WHAT IN THE WIG!?!” Koroko shouted. Everyone jumped, expecting an attack.

“What’s wrong Koroko?” Pandora almost shouted.

“The lanterns are on the ceiling!”

It was quiet for a moment.

“Yeah, so?” Baas finally asked.

“When did we get a ceiling above us!?! I thought we were traveling along the cliffs!”

“That’s why you nearly gave us a heart attack!?” Pandora reached for Koroko’s throat but he stepped out of the way in time. “We could be surrounded by Discretes or stirkfurs or... something else that wants us dead and you decide to scream because the ceiling changed!?”

“Panda shush!” Atsuma whispered harshly. “You’re screaming isn’t any better than his, especially since we’re in a cave.”

The group continued forward and as they did, the area changed even more. The cave grew wider, and brighter.

“This place...” Baas thought out loud. “...seems very familiar. It’s like Koroko said. Rather than cliffs, it seems we’ve entered a cave of some sort.”

\*Sniff\*

“Wait a minute.”

\*Sniff sniff\*

“This is it. We made it. This IS the Center.”

“You’re kidding me.” Koroko searched around as though he had lost something. “Where’s all the kids. When I was here, this place was chalk full of kids.”

“This is the entrance Koroko, or rather the exit.” Atsuma explained. “The Discretes never let kids come this far in. But Baas is right, this place definitely reminds me of those old days.”

“Ah yes.” Baas said. “I remember it like it was less than a year ago. How long has it been since I left? 8 months?”

“Maybe 10.” Atsuma corrected. “And Vee disappeared shortly after that. To think she’s been missing for all this time.”

“10 months? Wow. To think that I’ll be 17 soon.”

“If we live through this, now can we hurry up?”

With the darkness no longer being an issue Atsuma pushed his way passed Baas and began leading the group. Baas wanted to remain second, but Pandora and Koroko mimicked Atsuma’s actions leaving Baas to the end. Baas wanted to reinstate himself as group leader... guy, when something hit his brain.

“Wait a second, ten months?!” He thought “That means today is...”

“Baas, don’t linger.” Atsuma called.

Baas snapped out of it. It didn’t matter anyway, he couldn’t do anything about it if he wanted to.

Once again, the group found itself traveling for a decent amount of time. They came to a couple of places where the paths split into multiple trails, but there was always only one trail that was lit up. Finally, after what seemed like to Baas’ stomach an eternity, everyone heard a small mumbling. Atsuma held his hand up signaling those behind him to stop. The sound was coming from around a corner that was slightly ahead. Atsuma turned around and began whispering.

“Okay, I’ll go check it out. You guys follow behind me slowly but don’t do anything. If it’s a Discrete, we need to keep the element of surprise on our side.”

Atsuma approached, softly and slowly, walked toward the turn point of the cave. Whenever he was sneaking, the sound of his breath and heart seemed to escalate. Every noise he made he hoped that it wouldn’t do it again. Keeping his hand on his sword, he peered his eyes around the corner. He wasn’t sure what he expected. A horde of Discretes, a group of Discretes, one Discrete... but there were none. Instead, there was a big room; the ceiling arched much higher than the hall Atsuma had just came from and on the edges were several lit paths leading to different places. But what caught Atsuma’s eye was the center. In the middle of the room, under the only lantern dimly lighting up the place was a female sitting in a chair. Her head was down, causing her long hair to cover most of her face, her arms went behind the chair.

“Atsuma.” The voice whispered. As soon as it hit his ears, Atsuma recognized it. His instincts told him to do several different things at once. Run to the person, alert those behind him, cry, and he was close to giving into all of them. All this time... after everything he had done... but he had to be sure. He had to see her face.

“Atsuma.” The female looked up looked up directly into his eyes. “Please don’t tell me that’s you.”

Vanessa. It was her.

“Vee.” Atsuma said low. He quickly ran from his hiding place toward her. He slowly examined her body, expecting to see bruises all over. She was... okay. She wasn’t beat up or starved or anything. She was healthy. The only thing was her eyes. They were extremely red.

“Atsuma, quickly leave.”

“Right, we have to get out of here.” Atsuma tried to bring the Commander with him, but her arms were bound behind her to the chair. He quickly took out his sword and used the edge to begin sawing.

“Atsuma, you don’t understand. Just leave me, this is all a trap.”

“I know.” Atsuma continued sawing. The ropes were surprisingly weak.

“No Atsuma, it’s not any country doing this. It’s the Discretes. They don’t want me, they want...”

“They want Baas. I know.”

“You know? Well please tell me that you didn’t bring hi...”

“Miss Vanessa?” came an all too familiar voice.

Vanessa closed her eyes. Hoping... desperately hoping that she would not look forward to see the person she thought was calling her. Opening her eyes, Vanessa saw him in the entrance to the hall. Baas. Behind him, Koroko and Pandora came running. Pandora desperately grabbed Vanessa. Koroko just stood proudly, grinning as he did. Atlast, they had found their Commander... their mentor... their friend.

“Miss Vanessa.” Baas said in a stern tone. “Where have you been? We’ve been worried sick. I made dinner and now it’s gotten completely col...”

“Atsuma, why did you bring him here?”

Baas blinked quietly. “Well, that’s a welcome if I’ve ever seen one.”

“I didn’t bring him, he followed me.” Atsuma smirked. “I’ve been trying to get rid of this kid since I first set out for you. Truth is, kid can’t be stopped. Besides, he’s the one that figured out how to find you. Without him, we probably would’ve never figured it out.”

\*snip\*

Atsuma finally got the bounds cut and the ropes fell from Vanessa’s wrists.

“Okay.” Atsuma continued. “Come on, lets get out before any Discretes ...”

“WHY DID YOU BRING HIM HERE?!”

Vanessa didn’t move from her seat, but the scream had startled everyone.

“They don’t want me, Atsuma! They wanted Baas! And once he found me, they plan to kill him and everyone with him!”

“Yes Vee, we kno...”

“Then why did you come!? I would’ve been fine! They wouldn’t kept me alive until you found me! Why did you throw away your lives just to come out and find me!?”

Tears continued to flow down Vanessa’s face. This was one of the most unwelcoming sites anyone present had seen. This was their mentor. To see her this scared, was frightening in itself.

“Vee. I don’t know what the Discretes told you to make you like this, but the Vanessa I knew wouldn’t even have to ask why we were here. Even if you were here alive and well, I couldn’t sleep well knowing that I left you as a prisoner. If it were me sitting in that chair, you would’ve done the same. None of us forced the other to come here. We all came on our own accord, because that’s what team Vanessa does. We don’t let those we care about down, even if it means risking our lives.”

Vanessa looked Atsuma in the eyes. Atsuma did his best to give a straight face, but when looking at his old friend whom he waited so long to see... he couldn’t help but smirk.

Vanessa stared at Atsuma for a second. Then, as though she couldn’t hold it in, a small chuckle forced its way out of her mouth. She looked down and continued smiling.

“I had almost forgot what that face looked like. That old man did always tell me teaching you guys would lead to everyone’s death.” She looked up, fear no longer on her face. “You’re right Atsuma, I would’ve gone to get you. But you guys weren’t risking your lives, as soon as you found me, you ensured your deaths.”

“OH MY GOODNESS!” Baas screamed.

Everyone turned around. At the cave where the came, three Discretes were standing in their path.

“What in the wig!? You guys almost gave me a heart attack! Coming out of nowhere like that.”

“How’d they know we were here?” Koroko said, reaching for his sword.

“I don’t know.” Pandora said sarcastically, bow ready. “Maybe it was all the screaming you did back there.”

“No.” Vanessa said. She slowly stood up. “They’ve been following you this whole time. Like I said, this was all a trap.”

Suddenly, there was a rush of wind. Footsteps could be heard. Faster than anyone could make out, the room was suddenly filled with more people. Men and woman dressed in all black, wearing sunglasses, surrounded the group in the center. In a matter of seconds, Discretes blocked all the exits to the caves.

Everyone quickly got their weapons out prepared to fight, waiting for the Discretes to make the first move.

“Atsuma.” Vanessa said low. “There’s something you should know.”

“Whatever it is Vee, I’m pretty sure I already know.”

“But Atsuma...”

“Show yourself!” Atsuma yelled to the crowd. “Discrete A! Show yourself! It’s bad enough that there are a bunch of overpowered lackies who feel they can bully the world into their way of thinking, but I wanna know who is responsible for sending a hit out on a kid just for being different. I want to look him in the eyes and tell him what a sick and cruel person he is! And then... I want to fight him one on one.”

Everyone knew what Atsuma was doing. His classic style of manipulation. He was trying to annoy the Discretes. All of them at once, but mostly he wanted to annoy Discrete A. If things went well, the group might escape thanks to Atsuma’s mouth.

“How sad it must be to be a Discrete. Lying to everyone, only having people to order. I’ll bet you don’t even know what love is.”

A slight giggle came from a female within the crowd circle of Discretes.

“Atsuma, an idiot will scream outloud how stupid someone is, while showing just how stupid he is.”

The voice hit Atsuma like an impact arrow. Usually when a Discrete talked he felt a shiver go down his spine, but that wasn’t the case this time. The voice he heard was one that he recognized, but one that he didn’t think he’d ever hear again. Slowly, all the fighters turned to the Person who was speaking.

The woman stood upright with her arms folded. She wore all black and sunglasses, just like every other. She had black hair and though it was hard to tell in the dark, most knew she had tan skin. Atsuma shivered as the woman took off her sunglasses. Her green eyes stared down at the man with a welcoming smile.

Atsuma gazed at the woman. He gazed at her chest where an arrow should’ve been. He gazed at dripping blood that wasn’t there. Finally, he took a step toward the woman and said her name.

“Arty?”

Arttior continued to smile. She opened her hands as though welcoming the group with a hug.

“Welcome home honey.”

Chapter 103 End