Chapter 68 : The Start of An Interesting Story

Keely was feeling warm. That was thanks to the sun that was shining down on the back of her neck. The wind that blew and the water in the air helped to keep her from getting too hot though. This thought did not pass through Keely’s head at all. If it had, she would have felt that her body’s temperature was the least of her problems at the moment, for she was not alone. Pushing her forward, and carrying weapons, was the blue band Vatti had called Decson. She was taking Keely through the woods that lay near the Great river of Wig-Or-Log. She was taking Keely away from Vatti’s ship. She was taking Keely away from her teammates. Keely wanted to fight back. She wanted to suddenly charge at the Blue and race back to save Atsuma and the others. She imagined herself saving Baas and Sheina; using the Dragon and its sheath to get past any of the people in her way; just like the stories of war her dad had told her about.

There were a couple of problems with her fantasy though. For one, she was still tied up so fighting was impossible. Also, Decson had the Dragon in her midst. Until she relinquished it, Keely was at her mercy.

The two continued to walk away from the ship through the forest. Keely tried to glance back and see the sails, but the trees were too short and covered the sky from her. Their leaves did not allow her to see anything but the sunlight that slipped past them. It seemed as though hope for her getting back was disappearing.

Eventually she and Decson came to an open field in the middle of the trees, much like the one Keely had been in when the Blues ambushed the Oranges. It was there that Decson stopped shoving Keely forward. She then began to slow down.

“Okay.” She said. “Here’s far enough.”

Decson then proceeded to untie Keely from her bonds. Once she did, Keely quickly took a step back as though Decson were a threat to her. Decson wrapped the rope around her right arm, uncaring of what Keely did. Once that was done, she tossed Keely her sword.

“I trust you can find your way home from here. We’re told that Greys know their way around Wig-Or-Log greatly incase they need to be an escort-”

Decson suddenly stopped talking as Keely swung her sword, sheath and all, toward her. Decson stepped to the side to dodge the blow. Seeing that she had missed, Keely brought her left hand to the handle of the sword. She turned around and as she did the Dragon separated from its sheath. Due to the spin, the sword was first to attack Decson. The Blue leaned back and dodged it. Immediately after it came the sheath being used as a second sword. It came down toward Decson’s left foot. The Blue lifted her leg, dodging the blow. Keely then proceeded with multiple attempts at this again. Attacking with both her sword and her sheath, but Decson was not being effected. In fact, the opponent had not even pulled her weapon out or gotten rid of her ropes. She dodged all of Keely’s attacks with ease. Finally, Decson grabbed the sheath in mid swing with her right hand. Keely was shocked. It was true that the sheath did not have a sharp edge so catching it would not pierce the skin, but still, the force would usually throw off any of Brute and his men. Did her training really give her that much of a difference.

After catching the sheath and stunning the Grey, Decson kicked the girl causing her to fall on her back. Keely tried to get up but the kick and fall had hurt her to a degree that made it seem like a better idea to stay down.

“Are you crazy?” Decson said to the girl. “Why would you attack me? There’s no point to that. You’re a grey band. If the Discretes found out about this, you’d be dead.”

“I’d rather die than betray my friends.” Keely said, still trying to push past the pain.

“That’s sounds really noble doesn’t it?” Decson said. “Dying for something like honor. What if I had killed you here and now? No one but you would know that you died trying to save your friends. Does that sound noble?”

Keely did not answer the woman. Decson sighed. She then examined the sheath Keely had left in her hand.

“You have a fighter’s instinct, or a really good teacher. To use a sheath as a weapon isn’t something most people think to do, let alone someone who doesn’t fight at all in the war. With proper training, you would make a really good ally.” Decson then turned her attention back to Keely. “But take it from me kid, fighting in this war, isn’t all its cracked up to be.”

“What do you know?” Keely said rebellious. “You’ve only been in the war for a couple of years.”

“Maybe.” Decson replied with a light smile. “But I’ve been in it long enough to where I can take you out easily enough.”

That made Keely grow quiet.

“ Listen,” Decson continued with a serious look. “Rather than wishing you could spend your entire life fighting, be thankful. The way a Grey lives isn’t perfect, but at least you’re not expected to be on your toes for your enemies everywhere you go. Things could definitely be worse for you then they are now. Go. Live your life and hope you never have to spend it fighting like I do. In a war that never seems to have an end to it. In a war where it seems like you can never win.”

The Blue threw the sheath down next to Keely and began to depart. Before she could vanish into the forest though, Keely had one more thing to ask her.

“Why don’t you just quit then?” she called out. Decson turned around to see Keely stand up and repeat her question. “You don’t have to fight. Anyone can become a Grey band at anytime. Why don’t you just stop fighting?”

Decson turned back, there was a soft smile on her face. She answered loud and clear.

“What I want is more than just what the life of a Grey band can offer, so that would be pointless.” Decson then turned around and continued forward. Before she left Keely completely, however, she said something under her breath so that only she could hear.

“And not everyone can quit.”

The blue band then disappeared into the forest. Keely stared in the direction that she had left for a moment. Then, she looked at her sword and sheath which were on the floor. She picked them up and placed the Dragon in its flames as she began to walk forward. For a moment, she felt determined to help Atsuma and his team, just like her dad would. But that feeling only lasted for a moment and she slowed down to a stop. She recalled at how easily Decson had beaten her. It was weird. Keely had glanced at how Atsuma had fought the same girl. He made it look so easy when he was fighting her. Not to mention Keely’s own fighting ability. In her home town, Keely had always been seen as a great fighter, but Decson had tossed her aside so easily. What was worst is this Decson person did not even have a reputation for fighting. If Keely had fought someone like that Vatti girl who was a Great One…

With that thought in her head, Keely sat back up against a tree and sighed to herself. She began to wonder about her situation. Who was she kidding? She wasn’t ready for this. She had no training and no knowledge. The only thing she did have was knowledge of the landscape of Wig-Or-Log, but in reality anybody who fought in the war for atleast fifteen years had that.

She again let out another sigh which lead to her staring up into the blue sky.

“I’ve got to go back home.” She said to herself. “Well, it was fun while it lasted. I wish I could help you guys, but there’s no way I can break you out by myself. And I doubt anyone would help me rescue you. You guys have made a lot of enemies.”

She continued to gaze into the sky, the heat bellowing down on her, but it was okay because the shade of the tree she was leant up against blocked her from the most of it. It seemed very peaceful. It was so calm and relaxing. So calm… and…

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**“Wow…”**

Keely woke up suddenly from her slumber. Because she had not intended to go to sleep under the tree, she was confused and anxious. She took a second to observe her surroundings to help her remember exactly what had happened. Atsuma was gone. And so was everyone… oh that’s right. They had been captured, and she had been let go. She must have fallen asleep from the heat of the day. She wasn’t sure how long she had been napping, but she needed to get back home. There was nothing more she could do here, so it would be best to get back. She stood up and stretched her body.

**“Wow, oh wow…”**

Keely instantly stopped stretching and looked towards her left in fear. She had heard a voice. She was sure of it. She quickly reached for her sword and held it in a stance that showed she was ready to pull it out.

“Who’s there?” She called out in fear.

\*Twitch\*

Keely quickly pointed her attention towards where the noise was coming from. She was extremely nervous at what might come at her. With Atsuma and the others gone, she didn’t have any extra protection in case her minimum training didn’t work out. Still, she was confident in herself. She could do this. She was the daughter of a Commander, she had Orange blood running through her veins. She could do this.

Keely watched as the figure walked towards her out of the shadows.

“Come on!” she called getting antsy. “I’m not afraid of you!”

What she saw, she was not expecting at all. Even the wild dangerous animals that were said to be extinct would have been less of a surprise to her. It was a boy. A young boy. Younger than herself, or maybe just immature looking. He was certainly shorter than her. And the boy looked sad. He was sad. He was… crying. There were tears in his eyes, not yet flowing down his cheeks. Upon seeing the small person with such a sad face, Keely’s muscles began to relax and her face became less tense. This movement signified that she was starting to let her guard down, and she would have done so completely… had she not seen what was on his left bicep. Her eyes widened at the sight of it. She had often imagined what she’d do if she ever saw one. She would tell herself that if she did, she would immediately strike his evil heart. Or, if she wasn’t a match, she would trick the person who stood before her some how. But now that she finally saw one; now that she’d finally encountered a black band, and seeing that the wearer was this boy; this crying boy approaching her, she didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know what to think. Was her life in danger? How could it be? He was just a boy and he was crying.

“Please miss.” The young boy said. “They’re after me. You gotta help me. Please. Can you help me find my mommy?”

“You lost your mom?” Keely asked. She then quickly shook her head as though trying to shake an idea loose. What was she doing? This was a black band. They were to be killed on sight. She couldn’t try to talk with him. Still, when she looked at him, she couldn’t see anything but a helpless child.

“Some…some people in black…” the boy continued “they said she did something bad… and… and they took her... she told me to run… or they’d take me too… Please miss. Help me.”

“People in black?” Keely thought. “The Discretes.” As the thought of their name came into her head, a shiver went down her spine. She remembered her last encounter with them. How cold they seemed to her. How emotionless they were with Brute. Looking at this boy, she began to guess his story. His parents, or maybe just his mother, did something against the rules of Wig and was black banded. But that didn’t explain why this boy himself was a black band. The Discrete did not black band people unless they did something wrong. Perhaps the little boy helped her and did not know he was doing it. Then, Atsuma’s story of his son, Sean, was brought back to her brain. Perhaps the mother did not send this boy to the Center and kept him hidden for ten years. But, that didn’t make sense either because babies weren’t born with bands. Also, Atsuma wasn’t black banded for what he did, so that meant the mother shouldn’t have been. There was no way she would know unless she got involved. She looked at the boy who was still pleading at her with his eyes. She wanted to get involved, she really did… but she couldn’t. Whatever the case of this boy, as much as her motherly instincts told her to help him, her survival instincts spoke much louder. The Discretes would surely be after him, and she did not want to encounter them. After what she had seen, she would be happy if she never saw them again.

“No.” She said outloud. “No, I don’t want to get in trouble with the Discretes. You need to go. Go, before the Discretes find you here.”

“But…” the boy started.

“GO!” Keely screamed surprising both the boy and herself.

The boy scrunched up his face as though foretelling he was about to cry even harder. He turned around and walked back into the woods.

Keely stood there with an angry look on her face, her sword and sheath still in their same ready position only now they were shaking.

She thought of what had just happened, what she had just done. She let in sink into herself. Then, she started to cry. It was hard type of crying; tears flowed and multiple noises came from her mouth. She threw her sword to the side, hating it, and sat back against the tree she had fallen asleep on. As she continued to bawl, she covered her face with her both of her hands. What was she doing out here? Her friends had been captured. They were all probably dead from the time she had fallen asleep. And now, she just threatened to attack a little boy because she was scared that she could get involved with the Discretes. She didn’t go to help her friends, she didn’t help the little boy, she couldn’t even kill the boy like she was supposed to. She had no honor in what she stood for, which she wasn’t even sure was anymore. It was no wonder she was a grey band. This world was not meant for her. The world of war was too much for her. She couldn’t take it any longer. She should just take the Dragon and go home now before she had to make any other big decisions.

Keely took her hands from her face and wiped her eyes, sniffing as her right hand became smothered in tears. She looked at where she had thrown the Dragon, preparing to pick it up and leave. There was a long branch where the sword had landed. Keely’s eyes looked around frantically. Where was it!? All she saw was empty grass. Then, her eyes looked up into the woods and saw it. Only it wasn’t by itself. Someone was carrying it. It was in the hands of… the little boy? It was the same black band she had just saw a moment ago. He was looking at her, however, immediately when their eyes met his faced turned into fear and he ran the opposite way of Keely with the Dragon.

“Hey.” Keely called beginning to understand what was happening.

“Hey!” she called even louder. She quickly forgot her despair and replaced it with frustration. Jumping to her feet, Keely ran into the woods chasing after the black band, determined to catch the thief.

Chapter 68 End

Chapter 69 A Black Band

“‘Be more careful’ he says. ‘You could get caught’ he says. ‘You’re too reckless.’ he says. What does he know? Always on my case. I’m shocked he doesn’t still have people babysitting me. I’ve proven myself time and again and he still treats me like I’m a little kid. Just because he’s older and in charge…”

The person grumbling in anger to himself was indeed a kid. A boy. Being his age often meant people treating him younger then he would have liked. How old was he? He didn’t know for sure nor did he care. For a black band, it didn’t matter how long you had lived, only how long you could stay alive. And that’s exactly what this boy was, a black band. His band on his left bicep was displayed proudly. If he could, he would write his name in big bold letters on it. H-E-N-R-Y.

There was the rule in Wig-Or-Log that you could not cover your band because there was the possibility that you could be a black band. Henry knew different though. Real black bands, not those cowards who on spur of the moment broke rules, but people like himself who were dedicated to the life style, didn’t care if others knew they were black bands or not. Henry, himself, was actually quite proud to show you so; as if you could ever catch a black band.

Though this kid was talking out loud to himself and had nothing covering his criminal display, he was being more careful then he let on. He was not simply walking through the woods, but he was sneaking from tree to tree, searching for prey. What kind of prey? The colorful kind. Colored bands had food, weapons, all sorts of materials that black bands needed to survive. But Henry had to be careful if he wanted to get a good find. Though he was not afraid to cover up his band, if a colored band saw him it would mean having to either fight or flee. Fighting was fun, but most people in Wig-Or-Log had more experience than Henry. They hadn’t had more experience than him in running though. Colored bands always tried some strategic way to win a battle or find some fancy way to die trying, thus fleeing was an activity that was new to most of them. Even if someone could keep up with Henry’s speed, which he highly doubted, escaping was more than just running fast. Escaping was an art. It was knowing when to move, when to hide, what route to take and all things that came to REAL black bands with ease. Henry had often heard stories the others told of the other colors of the war. The Oranges were known for their boldness; the Golds for their decisiveness; the Blues for their artistic designs; even the rarely seen Greens had a reputation for being great strategists. If the others colors could talk about one quality for black bands more than any other, they would talk about their ability to make a clean getaway. Not that the other colors knew enough about black bands to tell stories. To them, black bands were simply scary figures told of that would be taken care of by the Discretes. But Henry was real. If others didn’t know it, that just made it easier for him to do his job.

After traveling some distance, the young black band spotted something in the clearing of the forest. He came to a quick stop and looked out from the safety of the shadows from behind a tree.

What he saw was someone lying in the opening underneath a tree. A possible treasure? Perhaps. It was odd to find someone alone outside of a territory, but that wasn’t enough to make Henry think this was useless. He moved to the next tree, closer to the clearing, to get a better view. Henry popped his head out from behind a bush… and what a view he got.

Before him was a girl, a beautiful girl, sleeping in the clearing. She was older than him… or could have been, he wasn’t sure. As he examined the girl, he swallowed hard in his throat. The sun shone down on her light, soft skin which reflected beautifully back at Henry. Her face was so calm and peaceful to Henry. Her clothes looked good on her. Sleek and black. And her band was… not black. Too bad. Her band would have really matched nicely with her…

At that moment, Henry’s attention diverted away from the girl’s beauty and toward her weapon. His eyes widened even more at what he saw. A nice beautiful long sword. He couldn’t tell if the sword was high quality, but even if it wasn’t, it would still be great for the collection. The design of the handle alone was great. A dragon. That was a rare find indeed. He had to make sure he got the sheath with it too. Those flames went excellent with the design of the handle. The lust for the sword made Henry stick out his tongue. This find alone would be enough to go home and call it a day, maybe even a month. He’d be the envy of everyone. Even Brothamo wouldn’t be able to say anything, though knowing him, he probably would anyway. These thoughts would have to wait until later though. For now, Henry needed to focus on grabbing that sword and high tailing it.

He began to creep around the opening towards the girl. The girl sleeping made it easy enough for him to take his prize, but Henry knew better than to approach her by stepping into the sunlight. He did his best to remain hidden and silently approached her in a circle like manner. Now he was more than half way there. He took another look at the girl. Once again, he noticed how the sun reflected off of her skin and how beautiful she looked breathing softly. It was like an angel had fallen asleep while on the job.

“Wow.” He said reacting to the sight.

Suddenly, the girl stirred. Oh no. His voice had woken her up. He stopped dead in his tracks, hoping he hadn’t been caught. Just because his voice had woken her, didn’t mean she knew that it did. It was possible to conclude that you woke up naturally. The girl looked around, drowsy and confused. She then relaxed and when she did that, so did Henry. This was good. The girl hadn’t noticed him. He continued to observe her, hoping she wouldn’t grab the sword. He needed it to be left on the floor if he wanted to get it away from her. Thus, Henry continued to creep slowly and carefully. As he did, the girl stretched out her body from exhaustion. That was an extremely valuable sight to the young boy. Again, as on instinct, his mouth responded to what his eyes saw.

“Wow, oh wow.”

Immediately after he said his statement, the girl looked toward his direction and became cautious. Henry face-palmed himself in humility. Twice now his mouth had turned an easy steal much more difficult. The girl ran to grab her sword and held it as though she were prepared to separate it from its sheath.

“Who’s there?” she called out.

Henry continued to beat himself up. With the sword in her hands, this would be much more difficult. If the girl had seen Henry, he would have to flee. Everyone had orders to kill black bands on sight. Anyone else in Henry’s position would have fled by now, but Henry did not want to leave so soon. That sword was just too good of a treasure. Maybe there was someway he could salvage this. It would depend on what color this girl was. If she was a Gold or Orange, he would have to leave her. They were not scared to kill their victims. If she were a Blue, however, Henry might have stood a chance. It might also depend on her rank. Obviously she wouldn’t be a Far, but if she were a Near rather than a Leader, she would be more likely to kill him instantly. They only needed one opportunity. If things were in Henry’s favor, he may have been able to talk her into of giving him the sword or… something. He knew that sounded foolish, but he desperately wanted that sword. So, he took a closer look at the band on the nervous girls arm, hoping he could come up with a miracle plan. When he saw the color it had, he gasped…then a huge grin came across his face. He took the chain that he kept in his right pocket and began spinning it as a plan formed into his head. Once it was done, he quickly put the chain back and proceeded.

Henry stepped out. He made sure to make noise as he emerged from the forest, intentionally stepping on a branch. The girl turned toward him. She was extremely nervous. Of course she was, she was a Grey. Probably one of the prettiest Greys Henry had ever… “Focus Henry.” He thought to himself interrupting his other thoughts.

“Come on!” The girl called getting antsy. “I’m not afraid of you!”

Henry stepped into the light with the saddest face he could make, sniveling as he did. He forced tears to emerge from his eyes.

“Please miss.” Henry acted. “They’re after me. You gotta help me.”

Outside Henry was crying, but inside he was smirking menacingly. Blues may have been gullible but a Grey was even better. They didn’t know about the world as much as everyone one else. They only knew stories that the colored bands could tell of. If Grey territory wasn’t visited so frequently by colored bands, a black band would probably rob a Grey territory every chance he got. It was incredibly rare to see one out alone with such a valuable weapon. This was an opportunity of a lifetime for Henry.

“Please.” He continued deceiving. “Can you help me find my mommy?” The word “mommy” was a bit much and Henry knew it as soon as it came from his mouth. He used it because it made him seem younger and more innocent, but he was actually too old to be using that instead of “mom” or “mother.” The girl did not seem to be bothered by it. Though her guard was still up, she showed curiosity.

“You lost your mom?”

Henry steadily approached the female before him. He could not help but notice that she looked even prettier when she was pitying someone. Still, he had to stick to his helpless gesture or his plan would be thrown off. Forcing more tears out of his head, he continued to lie. This time, he would add some stuttering and gasps to help sell his act.

“Some…some people in black…they said she did something bad… and… and they took her... she told me to run… or they’d take me too… Please miss. Help me.”

The girl contemplated with herself. As if asking herself what should she do? Everything was going according to Henry’s plan. Finally, the girl came to a decision. “No.” She said out loud. “No, I don’t want to get in trouble with the Discretes. You need to go. Go, before the Discretes find you here.”

“But…” Henry started.

“GO!” the girl said, startling herself just as much as she did Henry.

Henry made a face that showed he was about to start bawling. He turned round and headed back into the woods. As he did, that menacing smirk that had been his head made its way to his face. The plan was going well. He didn’t want the girl’s help at all. He didn’t even want her trust. All he wanted was her mistrust off of him. Now, she didn’t believe there was anything threatening to her in the forest. The fact that she turned down helping him only made it easier for him to execute his plan. Henry knew pretending the Discretes were near would give him an edge. Everyone was afraid of those guys. Even his dad had been afraid of them and he had certainly passed on his fear to Brothamo.

Once in the safety of the shade, Henry quickly and quietly made his way to another part of the forest. He settled himself and observed the girl. Immediately, he saw her throw her sword onto the ground near his area. This couldn’t be more perfect. Now he just needed something to… it just got more perfect. He picked up a branch near him, about the same length of the girl’s sword. It was like fate wanted him to have that sword. Now, to just not mess it up.

Slowly, Henry made his way out to where the sword was. As he did, he took constant glances at the girl. Her hands were covering her face. Good news for Henry. He looked back at the sword. It was in reaching distance. He didn’t even have to get his whole body into the opening where the sunlight was. He reached his arm out into the light, in its possession was the branch he had found. Slowly, he dropped the branch right next to the sword with a thud so low only he could hear. He then grabbed the sword by the sheath and brought it toward him. As it entered into the shade of the forest, Henry smiled with glee at himself. He got it! Now, came the easy part. Getting out before he was noticed.

He turned around and began to walk quickly in the opposite direction, but just before he got going, he wanted to take one last look at the girl. He turned around with a smile on his face, but as he did, his smile faded and his pace stopped. He hadn’t noticed at all while he was trying to grab the sword, but the girl was crying. Not just tears flowing either, but she was sobbing intensely. All of this because he had put on an act that he had been separated from his so called mom? That thought made Henry feel guilty. It wasn’t an emotion that he often got, but when he did, he didn’t like it. To think that with just a few actions, he made this maiden cry and now was about to run off with her weapon. Of course, there was no way he could return the weapon as it was way too valuable, but still, he couldn’t help but stand there and pity the poor girl. He watched as she took her hands away from her face and wiped her tears.

“There’s that pretty face.” He thought. “Come on, don’t be sad anymore.” He watched the girl look around. “Yes.” He thought. “She’s stopped crying completely. No more tears.” Then, her eyes met his. She had seen him. When that happened, he immediately remembered what he was doing. Or rather, what he was supposed to be doing.

“Oh no.” He thought in his head. He then immediately dashed through the forest away from the girl. He did not look back but he heard her voice call after him.

“Hey. Hey!”

Well that was just great, now she was after him. Once again he had made an easy job more complicated. Well, not necessarily. Even though the girl was now chasing him, there was no way she was going to catch up with him. After all, he was a black band. Running and escaping was his specialty.

Chapter 69 End

Chapter 70 : Irresistible Treasure

Henry dashed through the woods as quickly as he could. The girl was still on his tail. He didn’t have to see or hear her to know that. Judging by how chases usually went, there was no way he would have lost someone by now. The smirk on his face did not disappear though. Soon enough he would give this girl the slip. Running and escaping were his specialty.

Keely continued to work her way through the forest as fast as she could. It wasn’t easy. Walking through the forest was much easier than running. For some reason the forest seemed to work against Keely. Every low hanging branch between her and the thief who stole her sword seemed to jump in her way. And she had never noticed it before, but the forest had a lot of natural debris on the ground. She could often feel the different variety of sticks and branches that would scrape against her leg. But she couldn’t let that stop her. The Dragon was hers; how dare someone try to steal it.

Henry could hear the grunts of the girl getting farther and farther back. That was great! She wasn’t used to the forest like he was. When a branch came his way, he knew how do duck or move around it so that it did not stop his momentum. He also knew to keep a constant look out for all his surroundings. A person’s worst enemy could be found in nature if they were unfamiliar with it, but they could also find their best ally if they knew to use it right.

Keely continued to do her best but the kid was fast. Surprisingly for someone so young, he ran at a speed that definitely out matched her own. It was a good thing that he was heading in a straight line. Otherwise Keely might’ve easily lost hi-

At that moment, Keely tripped over something. A rock, a root, she wasn’t sure because she didn’t stop to check. After the event, she tried her best to immediately look back at the culprit. He had disappeared behind a tree. Frustrated, Keely gritted her teeth. She scrambled to her feet to hurry forward, hoping she didn’t lose the black band.

Henry watched as the Grey ran past him, smiling all the while. He had looked back just in time to see the girl beginning to fall. That was a golden opportunity. He used that to run behind a thick tree with low branches. Once there, he immediately climbed it as fast as he could. If you wanted to make a quick escape in the forest, it was important that you knew how to climb trees well. Henry could climb a tree about as fast as he could run. Once high enough, he settled on a branch and held himself still. He had been running in a straight line for a reason. If you did that and then suddenly disappeared, most people believed that you would keep running in that direction, and this grey band was no exception. She ran right past Henry and deeper into the woods away from him. When that happened, Henry dropped down from the low branch, squatting as he landed.

“Very pretty,” He said as he examined the sword, “but not too bright.”

He then turned to the opposite direction that the girl had went and began trotting along. Now that he had lost her, he could quickly make his way straight…

Henry stopped dead in his tracks. He listened. The air was very quiet and very still, the kind of quiet that Henry didn’t like. He didn’t know exactly why, but the atmosphere made him feel that someone was coming. Quickly he hid behind a tree with a large bark, crouching slightly as he did. Whatever sense had told Henry that someone was coming, it was right. He could hear rustling through the trees. The sound was approaching Henry at a rapid pace. As it got closer, his heartbeat grew faster. The noise made its way right next to Henry’s position, and then, it stopped. “Oh no.” Henry thought. If the sound had passed by him, it would mean that whoever was moving was just passing through, but since it just suddenly ceased, that meant that whoever was making that noise had decided to stop their journey in front of Henry.

Henry tried to breathe as calmly and low as he could. His anxiety made that difficult. At the rate the sound had approached him… he had a theory as to who it was. He really hoped he was wrong. Slowly, he peeked his head out from behind the tree. Then, he saw them. As soon as he did, Henry pulled his head back behind the tree. Though he hadn’t gotten a good look at them, he already knew what they looked like. They were dressed in all black and wore sunglasses, despite what the weather was like. The Discretes were stopped right by the young black band. Henry bunched himself up as best as he could as if that would help him from being seen more. He couldn’t help but panic. The Discretes had stopped right where he was. Chances were good that they had seen him in the distance and were now chasing after him. Still, there was a slim chance that this was just a coincidence. That was why Henry did not move from his hiding spot. That and the fact that he was too scared to even think about running. Every black band knew that meeting a Discrete meant certain death. That included Henry. He often made fun of his brother’s fear of the Discretes and joked about beating them, but deep down, Henry knew that there was nothing more he feared then to see a person in sunglasses dressed in all black.

“Where is he?” came a male voice.

Henry’s eyes widened when he heard the voice. They were indeed Discretes. The voice he had just heard showed no emotion in it. The chill it sent down Henry’s spine made the coldest thing Henry could think of seem like a trip in blistering heat. And what was worse was that the voice suggested they were looking for Henry.

“Here he comes now.” Another voice said. This time it was a female. Still, it showed that same void of care coldness that the voice before it showed.

Henry heard more rustling coming from a different direction. The noise recreated the experience Henry had just went through. It came at an amazing speed and then ceased at the area near Henry. Another Discrete had just arrived.

“Report.” the female voice commanded.

“Yes.” Another male voice said. It had to have been the guy who had just arrived. “The boy and his team have been captured by Vatti of Blue. One of the party members was set free, the female Keely of grey. She is in the immediate vicinity. Should we pursue her?”

“No need.” The female said. “She is not a threat to us like the boy. And the less people that are with Baas when he meets his fate, the better. Life is too precious to be wasted like that.”

Baas? Vatti? Keely? Apparently these Discretes weren’t looking for Henry. His heart calmed down, but his body still remained still as the conversation went on.

“Are we sure Baas will make it to the end of this journey?” The other male asked. “It seems highly unlikely that he will pass his test.”

“Still doubting?” the female asked.

“Merely using logic. The team he has chosen gets side tracked and are moving at a very slow pace. They are not very close to reaching the proper conclusion. Now that they are in enemy hands, it seems even less likely that they will find what they seek. Baas is suppose to be a threat, but everyday I am more convinced that he is just a child put into a situation he didn’t ask for.”

A threat? Someone was actually a threat to the Discretes?

“This isn’t the first time this has happened, and the results are always the same. Atsuma’s team has a great chance of escaping from the blue ship as they have done it before.” The female retorted.

Atsuma… Henry was sure he had heard that name before. Some great fighter or something.

“And Baas, being what he is, will reach the predicted conclusion and meet his fate. If you can’t see past the logic that says he won’t, just remember that everyone else in his situation did. Statistically, there is a 100 percent guarantee that he will too. Now, I think we’ve chatted enough about this. We have to report back and return before something else happens.”

Henry closed his eyes as he heard the movements of the trees. They departed so swiftly, it was though they were wind in the forest. It was then quiet. Did the Discretes really leave? Henry poked his head out from behind the tree extremely slowly. There was no sign of them. Only the forest and what it usually consisted of. Henry let out a deep breath of relief. He then laughed to himself in a low tone. To think that the so called unstoppable Discretes were outsmarted by him. Still, that was an interesting tale. Who in the Wig could be a threat to the Discretes. It interested him, but it did not keep his mind preoccupied. Standing there thinking about it wouldn’t give him the answers. The only thing he could do now was go home and be happy that he didn’t get cau-

At that moment, someone grabbed Henry from behind by the head. Henry tried to scream, but whoever it was had a good covering over his mouth. “The Discretes had returned!” he thought. He struggled, knowing that at any moment, the Discrete that had him could take his life with ease. But he wasn’t going down without a fight. Just like his dad, he would go down trying to take anyone else that he…

“You’re not getting away from me you little runt.” A female voice interrupted Henry’s thoughts. It… it wasn’t the Discretes. Henry’s mind began to make light of the situation. He recognized the girl. It was the very same that he had stole the sword from. Because of the Discretes, he hadn’t had enough time to make a decent getaway from her.

Keely was so glad that she had caught up with the thief. And she was sure that she was gonna get the Dragon back. She kept her hands over mouth. She wasn’t exactly sure what she was gonna do with him, but she needed to make sure he wouldn’t try to get away. Now, he was stopping his struggling. Keely figured it was because he must have realized that he was not getting way. Now, she just had to find a way to make him relinquish the Dragon. But as Keely triumphed in her victory, she felt something tickling her hand that covered the black bands mouth. Realizing what it was, Keely acted on instinct and let go of the boy, pushing him as she did. The boy had stuck his tongue out while Keely’s hands had been over his mouth.

Henry laughed at his triumphant getaway. Now he would just have to escape.

Keely growled at the black band. “Give me back my sword you little thief.”

Wow, such fierceness. Henry wouldn’t have guessed that with how peaceful looking the girl had looked when she was sleeping and how easily she had broken into tears. “Okay, sure.” He spoke back to the girl. “I’ll give it back, just like everyone else who gives back their stolen goods to the people they took them from. Oh wait… they don’t do that.” The little boy smirked at Keely.

Keely got more angry and tried to snatch her sword away from the boy. Henry let Keely almost grab it, but then pulled it out of her reach.

“Here’s the part where you say ‘Pretty fast for a little guy.’” Henry continued to joke.

“I’ve seen faster.” Keely said trying to upset the boy as much as he had upset her.

“Lying will get you nowhere. It especially won’t get you this beauty back. But flattery might help you. You should start by telling me how better this sword looks with me than it does with you. Then move on to how it really goes with my eyes.”

Oh man was this little boy annoying. To think that someone so young could behave so rudely. Then again, he was a black band. He had probably been getting his way since he was black banded. And that was when it hit Keely. If she wanted to get her weapon back, she would have to remember that her enemy was a black band. When that idea came to her, her face quickly turned to fear. She looked not at Henry, but passed him and spoke words of utter terror.

“Oh no. The Discretes!”

It was a simple trick and normally Henry wouldn’t have fallen for it. But he had just encountered three of them not too long ago and he feared that they had returned. Thus, he turned his attention away from Keely and toward his back at the empty woods. Keely ceased the moment and charged for her sword. She managed to grab the sheath that was on it, but Henry still had hold of the handle of the blade. In that split second they both tugged, and Keely almost lost the sword itself. But, feeling it slipping from its sheath, she pulled the sheath toward the side. This made the sheath hit the edge of the sword and jerked it out of the boy’s hand. Both the sword and its sheath were now back in Keely’s possession.

Surprised by the turn of events, Henry jumped back. Still he did not want to leave without the sword, and seeing how his opponent was a Grey, there was a good chance he could get it back by fighting. He reached in his right pocket and pulled out his chain. Due to the fighting atmosphere, he began spinning it in his hand.

“Have you ever fought a black band?” Henry asked, pretty sure of the answer. “Cause it’s not the same as fighting anyone else. Then again, you are a grey band so you probably don’t know what that’s like either.” In his voice, there was chuckling as though he were mocking the fact that Keely was a Grey. Keely, having just gone through what she had, took that offensively and became even more angry. She swung her sword at Henry, with the sheath still on. Because of the weight of both the sheath and the sword, the swing was slow giving Henry plenty of time to dodge it.

Seeing the slow speed of the attack, Henry continued his scoffing, all the while his chain did not stop spinning in his hand.

“Seriously, I think it would be easier for you if you just handed me the sword nice and…”

At that moment Keely separated her sword from her sheath. She held her sword in her left hand and her sheath in her right. Her face showed rage. Seeing the blade, Henry shifted his hand so that the spinning caused the chain to wrap around it.

“Alright, have it your way.” He said accepting the challenge.

Keely and the Henry circled each other, both cautious of what the other could do. Keely held both her sheath and her sword to her right side in separate hands. Henry was in hunched stance, as though he were some kind of animal. His hands were spread apart making it seem as though he were ready for grappling.

After a few more seconds of circling, Keely rushed in towards Henry. She swung her sword, and only her sword, nice and wide. Henry dodged the blows, waiting for the right opportunity to unleash himself. Keely swung her sword to her left, just above Henry chest. Using this momentum, she continued full circle and swung again. This time, Henry did not duck. To Keely’s surprise, the sword stopped. What was even more surprising was that it stopped because Henry had grabbed it with his right hand.

Henry smirked at the grey band. Even colored bands fell for this trick. The chain in his hand made it so that the blade of most swords would have no effect in piercing his skin. And because his hand was right behind the chain to cushion it, it would take a force more powerful than most put in their attacks to break the chain upon impact. Thus, Henry could block attacks by merely holding out his hand.

Keely, in shock from what she was seeing, looked Henry in the eyes. Henry took his free hand and waved his index finger as though telling the grey band no. He then took that hand and put it on Keely’s chin.

“Come on.” He said still with his smirk. “I’m sure there’s some understanding we can come to.”

The movement on his hand suggested that he was attracted to Keely. Keely, disgusted at that thought, shook the hand away from her chin.

“Alright.” Henry said pulling his hand away. “But as long as I can get your weapon in my hands, you’re fighting style is useless.”

Just then, Keely brought her sheath up toward Henry for a vertical slice. Henry was surprised by the attack and let go of the Dragon in a desperate attempt to let the sheath miss him. Henry needed to regain his balance, but Keely didn’t let him. She continued attacking with both weapons. Henry could think quickly when it came to escaping, but not fighting. He panicked and blocked Keely’s sword with his hand again, but was hit with the sheath. He fell to his back and Keely pointed the sword at him.

As she watched the boy stare at her sword in fear, a realization came to her. She was about to do it. She was about to prove herself. Even though she was a grey band, anyone was allowed to take the life of a black band. In fact, the rules demanded that you did. With this, the thought that she could never live up to her father’s war stories would disappear from her life forever.

Henry couldn’t believe it. He had lost to a grey band. A GREY BAND!!! Brothamo would never let him live this down. Then again, this girl wasn’t gonna let him “live” it down. Perhaps it was the fact that Keely was a Grey, or merely the fact that he was so young, but even though he knew he was most likely about to die, Henry couldn’t take it seriously. His voice became very melodramatic and he started acting to match it.

“Go ahead.” He said. “Kill me.” He then put his hand on his head as though he were signifying that it was too hot. “End the life of Henry. Oh dear world, is this how it ends? Will the escape artist of the century really lose his life, to the hands of the beautiful grey maiden?”

Keely’s curiosity perked when she heard a certain word.

“What did you say?” she asked him.

“What you didn’t like that?” Henry asked. “Perhaps you prefer ‘fair lady’ or ‘mysterious mistress.’ But I thought that last one sounded corny and the first one-“

Keely quickly got closer to the boy, grabbed his collar and held her sword closer to his neck.

“I meant the part about escaping. Are you really an escape artist?”

“Yeah.” Henry said getting nervous at how close his throat was to getting cut. “I’m a black band; we’re not afraid of anything and can escape from anywhere. An Orange group, a Blue ship; if I’m alive I can get away.”

“You’re a black band, and you can escape from anywhere.” Keely thought out loud.

“Yes, I believe we established that.” Henry said with his eyes still on the blade.

“You have no allegiance, and can escape from a blue ship.”

“Are you going somewhere with this?”

“You can escape from..” Keely got quiet as her eyes formed a plan in her head. Then, once she was done, she turned back to Henry. To her shock, his eyes were half closed and there was a grin on his face.

“You know, you’re ravishing when you mumble nonsense.”

Keely made a face that showed how stupid she thought that statement was. Then she let go of Henry, but still kept her blade to his throat.

“Okay, listen up, here’s how it’s gonna work.” She said trying her best to sound intimidating. “I have some friends captured on a Blue ship. You’re gonna help me help them escape. And in exchange I’ll let you live and I won’t tell anyone I’ve seen you.”

“You lost me at ‘listen up.’”

“Joke all you want, but this is the only deal I’m offering you. It’s either that, or I stick this sword in you. I may be a Grey, but I’m the daughter of an ex-Commander.”

“You know,” Henry said with a smirk. “This well thought out plan is nice and all- and I use the term ‘well thought out’ lightly- but in all honesty, it sucks. Why in the Wig would I risk my life just to help you and a bunch of people I don’t give a care about?”

“Because I have a sword pointed at you.”

“Too true.” Henry said eying the only thing that was keeping him from taking off. He thought to himself for a second. “How many people are we talking about?”

“Five.”

“Five?” Henry said low as though that number were too high for him. He then looked back at Keely. “What’s your name?”

Keely hesistated for a second, unsure if telling a black band her identity was a good idea or not. “Keely.”

“Well Keely, as fun as this exciting expe... wait, did you say Keely?”

“That’s right.”

Henry looked at Keely’s band to remind him of her color. It was grey.

“And you say your friends are on Blue ship?”

“That’s right.” Keely repeated.

“This wouldn’t happen to be Captain Vatti’s ship of the Blues would it?”

“Yes.” Keely said grudgingly. “I guess her reputation proceeds her.”

Keely of grey with group members captured on Vatti of blue’s ship. It was just like the Discretes had described. That meant there was someone on that ship who was a threat to the Discretes. This Baas person was so interesting that the Discretes were following him and his team.

With all this going through his mind, Henry could see the decision he needed to make. He looked at Keely, and gave a friendly smile.

“If that’s that case, then I will gladly help you.”

“Really!?” Keely said with her face lighting up. With that her defense was down. Henry saw his opportunity. He grabbed the sword pointed at him and pushed it towards Keely. The handle of the sword went into Keely’s stomach and she fell back. Before she could get up, Henry had the sword pointed at her.

“But just so you know, I’m not doing this because I think you’re a threat.”

He then dropped the sword from his hand, but kept that same hand out as though offering to help Keely up. Keely knocked his hand away.

“Oh really?” she said pulling herself up and getting her sword. “Then what’s in it for you?”

“Let’s just say that I recently discovered there was an irresistible treasure on that ship.”

“I should have known, as if a black band would do something out of the kindness of his heart. What kind of treasure is it?”

Henry began to walk away toward where the river would be. He spoke to Keely as he walked, expecting her to keep up.

“Walk and talk. I’m not sure how long your friends have been captured, but if they reach the Blue’s base, it’s going to be a lot more harder to get them out.”

Henry had ignored the question Keely asked, and that was intentional. If he could make friends with this… Baas character he would have a great ally. A threat to the Discretes would mean that any black band who knew him could get away with anything they wanted. That was a treasure no black band could pass up, or anyone in Wig-Or-Log for that matter. And if his suspicions were right, he was the only one who knew about this irresistible treasure and he wanted to keep it that way.

Chapter 70 End

Chapter 71 : Information Gathering

Keely and Henry ran through the woods. Well, Henry ran, dodging all the obstacles in his way. Keely was doing her best to keep up with him.

“Kid.” She called out to him. “Kid slow down!”

“I have a name.” Henry called back. “And we can’t slow down. You said you weren’t sure when these guys took your friends. The longer we take, the better chance your friends are into the Blues’ main base. We really don’t want that to happen.”

And with that, Henry and Keely kept running. It wasn’t long before they reached the great river. Keely was last to arrive on the scene, but even though she had been only a couple of seconds behind Henry, she had lost him completely.

“Boy?” She called out as she exited the woods. “Black band boy!”

“Will you keep it down!” Henry shushed Keely. The Grey turned to see that Henry was up in a tree. A tall tree. It stood out among the others that in that it was so tall, Henry continued his fussing.

“It may be easy for you Grey bands to run about as you please, but when you scream something like “black band boy” out into the air, you’re just asking for my death. The name’s Henry.”

Henry continued to look out into down the river.

“What are you doing Henry?” Keely called up to him.

“I’ll get a better view of Vatti’s ship from up here.” Henry said while staring out into the air. “If she hasn’t reached the base yet, I should be able to spot her up here and see how long it will take us to catch up to her..”

Henry then stuck out his hand and pointed.

“There. They’re a good distance but we should be able to catch up with them before they can break into one of the secondary rivers and head back to their base.”

Henry then began to make his way down the tree. Once on the floor, he spoke again.

“They’re going extremely slow. Either there isn’t much wind today or the Blues don’t really see any reason to hurry.”

“That’s odd since they have such valuable prisoners. You’d think that with Atsuma on bored, they’d hurry back to their base.”

“Obviously you don’t know Blues very well.” Henry said semi joking.

“Oh, and a black band knows everything there is to know about the war? As I recall, you spend your whole life running and hiding.”

“Better than spending my whole life doing nothing.”

“Hey. This do nothing girl just so happened to kick your butt.” As Keely said this, she crossed her arms and turned her head away from the boy. After a second, she turned back to see that he had gotten much closer to her, his face in that same dazed stare he had given her before.

“Yes, and may I say, you looked simply beautifully doing so. You’d make a great ally.”

Keely put her hand on Henry’s face, held it there for a second, and then pushed him away from her.

Henry, laughing at the whole thing, brushed himself off and began walking.

“Don’t worry, that’s what they all say at first.”

Keely shook head and followed the boy. And thus the two journeyed in this manor. Henry walked in the shade of the forest while Keely walked in the open sunlight. Their walks truly differed from each other. Keely walked free and open, letting her hips sway to some imaginary music in her head. Henry slunk from tree to tree, as though there were some enemy waiting for him outside the forest.

After a good while, a thought came to Herny. Though it remained quiet, he felt that he needed to gather some information. Saving these guys wouldn’t be enough for him. He needed to get on the good side of this Baas character. And for that, he would need to know more about him.

“So tell me about these people we’re going to save.” He sprang up. “I want to make sure I don’t kill the wrong people.”

“Well.” Keely began. “As I said there are five of them.”

“Are they Greys like you.”

“No, they’re all Oranges and teammates.”

“Well, why don’t you give me information about them from most to least important.”

Henry really didn’t care about the others. He just wanted to know about Baas, and if he was a threat to the Discretes, he was sure to come up early in the conversation.

“The most important… that would obviously be Atsuma. He’s a Leader and the most skilled fighter on the team. He’s tall, lean and tan. I’m not sure how old he is but he looks like he’s in his late twenties. I’m sure you’ve heard of him, he’s one of the Great Ones.”

That’s where Henry had heard that name before. Atsuma was one of those renown fighters the colored bands talked about. Henry figured he must’ve heard his name from one of the ex-colored bands. If he was the first in command, then Baas must be his second.

“Next would be a man named Koroko and a woman called Pandora.” Keely continued. “They’re Atsuma’s best friends and best teammates. Koroko is a near, whom, if given the chance, is a very fierce fighter. His and Atsuma’s combo attacks are said to be unstoppable. He’s big and tall and wears a tunic. And Pandora is a Far. One of the best in Orange, if not Wig-Or-Log. They don’t get along to well for best friends.”

“Wow.” Henry thought to himself in the midst of Keely’s talking. “Gathering intel’s gonna be much easier than I thought. But still, she hasn’t mention that Baas person yet. He’s got to be next…”

“Then there’s Sheina. She’s a Leader but cause she hasn’t had much experience, she’s not as good as the other ones. Still of those on the team, she’s my favorite. She keeps saying how Baas is so much better than her, but I think its cause she’s timid from being away from action for so long. Baas just got out of the Center so he’s not scared…”

“Wait…” Henry interrupted. “Baas is straight out of the Center?”

Keely paused for a second, confused of the relevance of the question. “Yeah. He’s only sixteen. He’s still older than me, but he’s acts so goofy like he’s a little…”

At this point, Henry ceased listening to Keely and began to think to himself again.

“Only sixteen and he’s a threat to the Discretes? What kind of person is this guy? And if he’s such a threat, why did the Discretes wait until after he left their watch to take care of him? They could’ve taken care of him back when he was right in front of them. Actually, now that I think about it, the Discretes could take care of him now. Yet they’re just following him and watching him. What are they waiting for? Do they really think he’s a threat or did I just…”

“Uh Henry…”

Henry looked up. Keely quickly ran toward him in the shadows of the forest, as though she were scared. Henry attention turned forward up the river. The ship that they had been following was up ahead. But… something was different. The ship was smaller than it should have been. Though it was true that the Blues kept small ships, the didn’t have sails that big.

“Henry.” Keely asked. “What’s happening. The ship looks weird.”

“It’s sinking.” Henry said not taking his eyes off of the ship.

“Sinking?” Keely asked. “Then they escaped!” She then began to rush over, but before she could get far, she felt Henry’s hand pull on her arm.

“Hey, wait, hey. Don’t just rush into the situation.”

“What are you talking about?” Keely said. “They’ve sunken the ship. We should go help them.”

“No!” Henry insisted. “Boy, now I know how Brothamo feels when he’s talking to me. Keely, wait. Don’t think you just know the what’s happening.”

“But if they sank the ship…”

“If they sank the ship, the Blues will swim down stream and your team will be waiting for you by the shore. That’s what’s suppose to happen, but that doesn’t mean it necessarily will.”

Keely looked back at the ship which was now not in motion. As eager as she was, she allowed herself to calm down.

“Okay.” She said. “What do we do?”

“We stay in the shadows as we approach. Observe everything. If its safe, then we’ll… wow I do sound like him… take actions accordingly.”

“Okay.” Keely said now completely calm. “You know, you can act like an adult sometimes.”

“When you’re a black band, you’re forced to grow up quick.”

“How old are you anyways?”

“Well, that depends.”

“Depends on what?”

Henry then brought back out his charm smile.

“Do you like older guys or younger guys?”

At that moment Keely realized that she had not gotten her arm back. She snatched it back and gave Henry a disgusted look.

“And here I thought you had some adulthood in you.”

Henry gave a smile and went back into the shadows of the tree. Keely, though reluctant, followed him.

The two continued their journey towards the boat in the distance. Keely was anxious to get there, but she held her patience and kept at Henry’s pace. She even began walking like him, creeping from tree to tree as though she were frightened that she would be seen herself. They went this way the whole way there, they were tempted to speak but the situation made it less likely to happen. They both wanted to get to the ship Keely to help her friends, Henry to see the Baas character. Finally, they got to the scene… and they both saw a sight they weren’t expecting.

“Henry… what do we do now?” Keely asked stunned.

“I… I’m not sure. But one thing’s certain, we can’t stay here.” Henry said pulling Keely away from the light of the sun.

“Henry, we’ve got to help them.”

Henry gritted his teeth. Then, without warning, he turned around and walked into the woods.

“Henry!” Keely called toward him.

“Come on.” Henry said continuing his journey into the forest.

“Henry!” Keely called again. She looked out into the river with distress on her face, then back to the river.

“Henry.” She called chasing behind him.

The two has looked across the river and had seen Keely’s teammates. But they weren’t escaping from the Blues, they weren’t even fighting the Blues. Henry and Keely witnessed Atsuma’s team being captured by the Golds. And Henry knew… this changed everything.

**Chapter 69 End**

Henry slunk from tree to tree, being careful not to be seen by anybody. As he did, Keely walked at her own pace out in the open, pondering what the boy was doing. It annoyed her that he felt he had to keep himself hidden every single step of the way.

“Can you not walk normal?”

Henry pushed himself up against another tree.

“Yeah, real easy for a Grey to not worry about being seen.” He then ran to the next tree. “These woods are known for having all sorts of visitors: Golds preparing for a fight, Oranges scouting the area, and of course the blue ships that are always somewhere on the river. You have to be careful.”

“You seem to be taking it to the extreme.” Keely said still walking normal. “There’s no one around.”

“Everyone who isn’t a Grey that lives in Wig-Or-Log is cautious about who sees them because if an enemy sees you before you see them, that’s it for you. For us black bands its even worse. One sight of us and we’re dead. So we have to make sure that we’re never seen or caught, especially by the Discretes.”

“I thought black bands weren’t afraid of anything.” Keely began to tease.

Suddenly Henry was right in front of Keely, leaning his head toward her.

“Well, that wasn’t entirely true, I afraid of dying alone.”

Keely put her hand on Henry’s face, held it there for a second, and then pushed him away.

“You know, you say some pretty mature things for a kid your age.”

“Well,” Henry said continuing his lurking, “You’re forced to grow up pretty quick when you don’t have the Discretes watching over you all the time. Or in your case, when your parents can protect you from anything that comes. I was taught to fend for myself since I was little.”

“**Were** little? How old are you?”

Henry was silent for a minute. Then he turned to Keely.

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“Really? In that case, I’m fifteen as well. Unless you prefer older guys, in which case I’m seventeen.”

“I highly doubt you’re older than me. You look so cute.”

Henry raised an eyebrow at Keely and smirked.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Keely said sternly. “I meant that you still have boyish features on your face.”

“Well, you still have girlish features on **your** face, so there. Not everyone grows up quickly”

“Oh, is your age a sensitive spot?”

The atmosphere became quiet. That was an obvious “yes” to Keely. But she hadn’t meant for the boy to feel uncomfortable. She decided to try and change the subject.

“Wait, you said that you were taught to fend for yourselves. Who in the Wig would teach a black band.”

Henry sucked his teeth in aggravation. “You know, you ask a lot of questions about things that don’t concern you. Why does the life of a black band interest you anyway?”

Keely hadn’t realized, but she had been into the boy’s business. “I’m sorry. The people we’re going to rescue asked me all sorts of questions when I first met them. Well, Baas did. I guess I got the idea from him that everyone did.”

“Baas…” Henry recognized the name. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“No.” Keely laughed. “I bet Sheina would give me a hard time if I even tried to get with him.”

“What is he some fancy fighter or something? The Commander of a base?”

“No, he just got out of the Center. He’s nowhere near becoming the Commander of anything.”

Henry almost tripped when he heard that. A kid who just got out of the Center. That meant he was only sixteen. This was the threat that the Discretes were talking about?

“How’s his fighting?” Henry asked still trying to get information.

“Well, I’ve barely seen him fight myself, but he seems to be one of the best for his age. Sheina tells me stories all the time of the amazing feats he accomplishes. He was actually put on Atsuma’s team, that’s the best team in all of Orange.”

“You don’t say.” Henry said. He then rolled his eyes. No wonder people asked her questions, this girl was an open book when it came to information gathering.

“Yeah, Atsuma, Koroko and Pandora. They’ve been teammates since they were little. Sheina and Baas were recently added to the team. They had one more person named Vanessa whom they re now searching for…”

Keely stopped talking. The two had reached the edge of the forest and out in the sun they could see the river. However, there was no boat. Henry looked at the sky. He then looked down one end of the river, and then the other.

“Come on.” He said not looking at Keely. “They’ll head this way. If those guys were going to the Blue base, they’ll head south. Once they find a departing river, they’ll make their way southeast…

Henry looked up, Keely was no longer there. She was already walking south down the river.

“Hurry up.” She called back to him. “We’ll need to catch up to them.”

Henry stared for another second, then he smirked.

“Greys.” He said to himself. He then made his way back up to where Keely was. After he caught up to her, he made his way back into the woods. And that was how they stayed. Keely walked in the sun along the river while Henry snuck through the shadows of the woods.

“Must you be so scaredy?” Keely asked him.

“I thought we established that.”

“Still, what you’re doing just seems so unnecessary. Even Atsuma’s team didn’t walk that carefully.”

“You mean your team that got caught by their enemies? Yeah, I think I’ll follow their shining example.”

“Hey, don’t rag on Atsuma’s team. They’ve accomplished a lot since they’ve been alive. Just because you’ve decided to live your life as a criminal doesn’t mean you can talk down about others.”

“I wasn’t talking down on them because they weren’t black bands, I talked down on them because they got caught. And before you go preaching to me, you should talk to yourself.”

“Oh, am I judging you before I’m getting to know you?”

“Never mind.”

“No, not never mind. I think I understand you clearly. Black bands do bad things but then they can’t take the punishment.”

“Shut up.”

“You broke some rule that the Discretes made and now you have to deal with the punishment.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking bout.”

“Don’t I? I knew someone who became a black band before my very eyes. Its people like you who put my little sister’s life in danger. If it weren’t for the Discretes showing up, she would be dead now!” Keely was starting to tear up with recalling what happened with Brute.

“You black bands, you do selfish things and expect the world to bend to whatever you want! If only the Discretes would kill all of you! Then the rest of us could live in peace-“

“Do you know want to know what I did?” Henry asked now yelling. “You want to know what crime I committed, it was so heinous that the Discretes saw it fit to put me on a kill list?”

Both he and Keely had stopped walking at the outburst and there was a split second of silence. Then, Henry spoke out again.

“I was born! The only thing I did wrong was choose to live!”

Henry and Keely stared at each other. Keely’s turned from hatred to compassion as Henry’s eyes filled with tears. Henry turned away from Keely. He hated when people felt sorry for him. Still, he had already said this much and now felt compelled to tell more. He just kept speaking with his back facing Keely.

“My dad committed a crime. I don’t know what, but for some reason the Discretes black banded him. He stayed hidden and safe. He was one of the best black bands that you could image. He’d never get caught, was rarely even seen. But one day, he fell in love with another black band and they had a children. They had my older brother and me. My dad wanted to send us to the Center, but he couldn’t. There was no way he could get anywhere near a territory to ask them to deliver us to Discrete. And the Officials in their great wisdom decided to hide the Center so no one could find it. Thus, my dad was stuck, raising me and my brother. He didn’t think it was a burden, but the last thing he wanted to do was force us to become like him. Become someone that would be hunted by everyone else they saw. Then, a couple of years after I was born, the Discretes found his hideout while he and his wife were away. They killed everyone there except for me and my brother. They decided to take us with them. They put bands on us that my brother says immediately turned black. I often wondered why they didn’t kill us right then and there. My brother says it was because they wanted to take us to the Officials and ask could our lives be spared. But my parents knew better. They knew the Officials would never make an exception. So they followed those Discretes. And when they made camp, they planned our escape. My mother was to be the distraction. She ran and made noise. The Discretes near me and my brother chased after her. That was when my brother saw my dad. He picked me up, and m