Chapter 92

Night yet again. This was the fifth night since the group had left Diablo. Atsuma had wanted to start a fire really badly but grassy plains weren’t abundant in wood. He wasn’t really cold, but he found himself shivering a lot. All the things that Diablo had said... he wanted to believe they weren’t true, but he couldn’t find any proof. Every time he found something that could possibly lead to a hole in Diablo’s story, he either ran into a wall or didn’t know enough information to keep his proof stable. He had to make sure he didn’t start thinking about it during the day. It was good to know that he was safe at... night... what if this was apart of their plan too? But... there’s no rule against going out at night. Atsuma let out a sigh. It was too much. Trying to solve it all was unnecessary. He had one thing he had to worry about. Finding Vanessa.

“Hey Ats.” Koroko said. “Can you sleep?”

“There is rarely a time where you’re awake Koroko and I am not.”

“Yeah, but that’s usually because you’re so worried about keeping watch, even though no one ever attacks at night.”

“Diablo attacked us at night.”

“That’s my point. Ever since Diablo came, you’ve been acting different.”

“I’ve noticed it too.” Pandora said sitting up. “You seem to wonder off some times, like Baas.”

“Well we are brothers.” Atsuma joked. “Maybe it’s a family thing.” Atsuma let out a smile, but his friends didn’t find the joke as funny as he did.

“Guys I’m fine. I’d be lying if I said this ‘our whole lives situation is a lie didn’t disrupt me’ but it’s nothing I won’t eventually get over.”

Slightly away from the rest, Baas and the other youths lay in their own area. Baas had found sleeping to be... troubling as of late. Every thing he saw, everything he thought about, made his mind race. He began to believe this was a trait of the Discrete Gene. Perhaps an enhanced curiosity or... something like that. Still, it was beginning to annoy him. He remembered when he wouldn’t think so much about things. He was just do and it all worked out. The only time thinking really ever came into play was when he was fighting, and then it didn’t seem like thinking. It just seemed like another part of...

\*scratch scratch scratch\*

Baas’ ears picked up noise. The Orange almost shot up, but then he realized that the direction of the sound was coming from Vatti. He started to crawl over towards her. Vatti was laying near Baas, but her body was turned away from him so he couldn’t see what she was doing, but that didn’t stop his ears. The scratches suddenly became faster.

“What do you want Baas?”

Baas figured she must’ve heard him coming.

“Geeze, I just wanted to see what you were doing.”

Vatti turned her body so it faced Baas.

“I’m sleeping.”

“Nu uh, I heard you scratching in the dirt.”

“I’m not doing anything Baas, I’m just drawing.”

“Drawing?”

Vatti sat up. Apparently she wasn’t about to be left alone.

“Yeah. Usually I carry around a pencil and pad with me. But it sank when my ship did.”

“I never pictured you as an artist. Seems abit… girly.”

Vatti glared at Baas, Baas returned it with a grin. Rather than hurting him, which was want the Blue wanted to do, she turned began explaining.

“When I would be at night at had free time, the Commanders would suggest doing something relaxing. I just wanted to practice my swordfighting or make new battle plans, but they insisted I do something that wouldn’t stress my body or my brain. Someone suggested drawing. A lot of Blues draw. So I started doing it from time to time just to make the oldies shut up. Before I knew it, I was doing it out of habit.”

Vatti looked at Baas. He was no longer paying attention. Instead, he was moving his finger in the dirt. Intrigued, the Orange decided to try his hand at drawing. All he had to do was picture it in his mind and draw it right? He attempted to draw an ear... that wasn’t an ear. Erase. Once more. An ear... no, that’s still not it. Once more... still not an ear. Why couldn’t he do it?

“I guess the Discrete Gene doesn’t come with drawing skills.”

Baas pouted, he felt like giving up.

“You’re doing it wrong, stupid.” Vatti placed grabbed Baas’ hand and guided it through the dirt.

“Drawing is not about making what you know, but making what you have look like what you want. Rather than trying to draw an ear, start with a curve that looks like a part of an ear.”

She moved his hand in the proper motion.

“Then draw another curve that looks like another part.”

Again, both their hands moved.

“Keep that motion going, and eventually you’ll have want you wanted.”

Vatti let go as the picture was finished. It did indeed look like an ear.

“So...” Baas deduced. “Rather than looking at the world as objects, I should look at it as shapes.”

Vatti paused for a moment. “I never really thought about it, but I guess that’s correct. Atleast, when it comes to drawing.”

“Can you guys keep it down?” Henry fussed. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

“Do I look like I care?” Vatti asked glaring at the black band. Henry wanted to rebuttal, but he honestly had no comeback so he just forced his head down in a sleeping position, showing that he did not approve of the Blue’s response.

“Vatti. Let me see your hand again?” Baas said, completely oblivious to the conversation she just had.

Vatti held up her right hand. Suddelny, Baas grasped it with both of his hands. Vatti felt her heart beat.

“Baas, what are you doing?”

“Your hands.” Baas said. “They’re softer than mine. Why is that? You’ve been fighting just as much as I have, probably more.”

“My hands aren’t that soft.”

“No, just softer than mine.”

“That’s probably because you’re a guy.”

“Well, why do guy’s have harder skin than girls?”

“I... I don’t know? What’s the sudden interest in skin.”

“I think it’s the Discrete Gene. When you grabbed my hand, I immediately took notice that I enjoyed it. But I wouldn’t enjoy if a guy grabbed my hand. So I started wondering what about your hand made me like it.”

“Just go to sleep Baas.” Vatti said really quickly. She again laid down facing away from him. Baas did what he was told and layed back down. Unbeknown to him, Vatti had turned away from him for a reason. A huge smile was on her face and she couldn’t make it disappear. She again began drawing in the dirt. It was the same picture she had been drawing before Baas had disturbed her. She still did not want Baas to see it, but this time she drew it with a certain assurety.

Chapter 92 end

Chapter 93: The Black Death

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Atsuma said moving some weird looking leaf from his way.

“Yup.” Henry said from in front of Atsuma. “Home sweet home.”

“I can’t believe you live here.” Baas said trying hard not to stub his toe. He still had no shoes on and the roots of this place were sticking up even higher than other trees.

“No wonder nobody ever found you.” Koroko said catching himself. “This is such undesirable territory. You’d never be able to build anything here.”

“I guess that’s why it’s perfect for black bands.” Vatti pointed out. “If I passed this area, even if I saw someone, it wouldn’t be worth my time to investigate. Just getting anywhere would be a chore.”

“Unbearable humidity as well.” Sheina said combing her hair with her fingers.

“Yeah, you guys may be used to easy conditions, but us black bands... we’ve got to make do with what we have.”

“Is that why you steal?” Vatti said, mainly using it as a point against what he said.

“Hey, you heard that Diablo guy. My people are the only people resisting this fantasy war. So in a way, we’re actually living the right way and you guys are living wrong.”

“Right.” Atsuma said, not believing Henry. “Speaking of your people, won’t they be upset when they see a bunch of... uh... ‘colored bands’ coming into their territory?”

“They will.” Henry said simply. “Brothamo will probably lecture me again. But he’ll get over it. He always does. Be prepared though. Barkon likes to attack anyone who gets near our base. As long as you’re with me, he won’t kill you immediately so stay close. But when they attack, don’t fight back.”

“Koroko.” Pandora accused.

“What?” Koroko laughed. “You act as if I’d kill them.”

The eight trekked through the jungle like terrain. After a noticeable amount of time, they made it to the entrance of the black base cave.

“Here it is.” Henry said “And all its glory.”

“I hope the inside is better looking than the out.” Vatti noted brushing her shoulders.

“Why is it that plants like these aren’t everywhere?” Baas asked. “Is it that these kind of trees just can’t survive or...”

“Baas.” Vatti interrupted. “No one cares.”

“Henry, I do hope you have some sort of refreshments or something.” Sheina complained “Not to sound rude, but I am completely exhausted.”

“Well,” Henry said, “you won’t exactly get the welcome wagon, but they shouldn’t kill you.”

“Henry, I’m confused.” Keely spoke. “Barkon attacked you and me long before we got to this part of the jungle. Why didn’t he stop us this time.”

“I don’t know how that jerk thinks. All I know is he needs to lighten up or he’ll die of worrywartness. Come on, it’s not that far inside.”

As the group entered the cave, it became darker and darker.

“What no lights?” Koroko asked.

“We don’t want people thinking someone lives here. Eventually you’ll see lights, but not until we get to the actual base.”

“Ow.” Baas let out. “Vatti, give me your shoes.”

“Why in the Wig are you asking me for my shoes.”

“I can’t see the freaking rocks on the ground. I keep stubbing my toes. Give me your shoes.”

“Why? So I can stub my toes? I don’t think so.”

“What kind of best friend are you?”

“The kind who cares about her toes. Now stop asking can you wear girl clothes.”

“If your shoes are for girls, why are you wearing them?”

\*punch\*

“Ow! No fair! I can’t see! OW! Great, now my arm and my toes hurt. Anybody want to give me their shoes? I’ll be your best friend. Atsuma?”

“No. Shut up Baas.”

“Hey, that’s Vatti’s line.”

“Actually it’s my fist’s line. I’ll let it speak again if you keep talking.”

There were times when Baas feared the Vatti fist and times where he ignored it. His arm was still aching from the last attack he received making him fear it this time. Thus, his mouth silenced for the rest of the trip.

Finally, light started to appear.

“Everyone slow down.” Atsuma commanded. “Let Henry go first and get a lead. We don’t want to be killed just for walking into their base.”

The group stopped. Except for Henry who stepped ahead.

“Okay, I’ll go ahead and let anyone by the entrance know you’re with me. Then I’ll talk to Savvi. I might not even have to see my brother.”

The group watched as Henry walked ahead.

“His brother is the person in charge of this place right?” Atsuma asked.

“Yeah.” Keely answered.

“Hard to believe a kid like that is related to the guy in charge. You’d think that he’d be a bit less... loose.”

“I’ll bet they’ve got it pretty easy.” Koroko said leaning up against the wall. “I mean, what’s the worst that can happen to a black band?”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!” came a scream. It had obviously came from Henry.

Immediately, everyone rushed forward. Stepping from a dark cave and into the light made it difficult to see, but eventually the scenery was made clear. Henry, on his knees staring into the black base. What was he staring at? Black bands were scattered everywhere. The only thing was... none of them were standing. All of them were lying on about, drenched in their own blood. The area was no longer a base of black bands, but the site of a massacre.

“What happened here?” Koroko asked.

“No bodies except for black bands.” Atsuma thought outloud. “That means this was a victory for one side. I only know one group who could do that when fighting against this many people.”

“Wow.” Pandora said. She put her hands to her face gently. “I’ve seen and killed plenty of people, but it has a whole new meaning when you realize that we don’t have to.”

“The way Discrete’s work always have a new meaning.” Vatti said. “They do what they want.”

Henry stopped for a second.

“Brothamo!” he took off running through the base.

“Kid wait!” Atsuma called. He ran after him.

Henry ran up the stairs of the cave. He knew where to go. No matter where he went he saw death. Abundant death he was hoping, praying that he would not see it there. Ignoring the warnings of Atsuma, he rushed through until he finally made it to his brother’s room. Trudging in, he expected to see his brother dead against the wall, he was hoping to see him still alive and well, but when Henry got inside... nothing. No one was there. Not a Discrete, not his brother, it was just an empty room.

“Brothamo!”

Henry called out as he turned around to leave. Before he went anywhere, however, his face ran into Atsuma’s chest.

“Henry. Listen, you gotta stop.”

“No! Get outta my way! I gotta find my brother!” Henry tried to push passed Atsuma, but the Orange was not letting him through.”

“I get it, I know. But you can’t go running around screaming. The person who did this could still be...”

“No! You don’t know! I gotta find my brother! BROTHAMO!”

\*pow\*

Then, he fell... as his world became black.

Atsuma caught the black band before he could hit the ground.

“Sorry kid.” He said, laying him down gently.

Atsuma took a look around. The room was slightly messy, but other than that, there was no sign of death. If Henry’s brother had been killed, it hadn’t been in here. Having investigated, the Orange took Henry’s body by the torso in one arm and carried him down back to the center of the base.

“Wow, you’re pretty ruthless aren’t you?”Vatti said figuring what happened.

“This attack was recent. If the Discretes are still around, we can’t have him letting them know that we’re still here.”

“No wonder the kid’s a black band, he wouldn’t have lasted a day in the war.” Koroko mocked.

“Can’t really blame him.” Atsuma said. He put the teary eyed boy down gently. “He was never apart of this war, nor did he want to be. The concept of death alone must be far away from his reality, let alone a massacre. Even so, I can only imagine anyone’s reaction to come and see their entire base looking like this.”

“I thought this place was safe, even from the Discretes.” Koroko pointed out. “How’d they find it.”

“I don’t know.” Atsuma answered. He put his hands on his hips to show he was thinking. “Perhaps they overheard us planning to come here.”

“I don’t think so.” Baas spoke. He stepped forward, trying to avoid looking at the lifeless bodies around him. “According to what Diablo said, the Discretes want us to find them. If they had heard we were coming here to look for clues on finding them, I don’t think they’d run ahead and stop us. Whatever the reason for this, I don’t think it was us.”

“Even so, we can’t stay here long. This may not be our fault, but I can think of many reasons that we need to get out of here now. Keely.” Keely looked up from suddenly hearing her name. “I’m going to ask you to do something extremely uncomfortable. Are you ready?”

Keely didn’t know if she was ready, but she nodded anyway.

“Henry is knocked out. And even if he wasn’t, I don’t think he’s in any condition to do this. You’ve seen that... Savvi guy before, do you think you can identify him?”

Keely knew what Atsuma was asking. Her fear was telling her to say no, but she swallowed that and nodded.

“Alright. Koroko, Pandora gather all the bodies and line them up down here on the first floor. We have to be quick about it.”

“Aw man, I’m gonna get blood on my outfit.” Korok whined.

“There’s always blood on your outfit Koroko.” Pandora scolded.

“You’re missing the point Panda.”

Vatti stepped down to help out. “Guess I’ll look for the small fry. Baas, you can handle the medium sized people right?”

Baas looked around nervously. “Um... I uh...”

Vatti looked at Baas with a confused look. But before she could really ask questions, something else caught her attention.

“On second thought, stay with Sheina. I don’t think she’s taking this too well.”

Baas turned to see Sheina. She was leant up against the wall shaking.

“Yeah.” Baas said smiling. “I’ll do that.”

Moving the bodies took some time. There were about 50 dead black bands. Finally, the bottom layer of what used to be the black base was filled with all the bodies.

“Well now, that guy is heavy.” Koroko spoke, placing down a big dark skinned man. “Probably the biggest one here.”

Keely recognized the body immediately. It was Barkon. To think that just the other day he had been telling her the story of his past. And now he was dead. She felt tears starting to build up. There were so many dead people here. Was this what being a colored band was like? Having to deal with this on a normal basis? Keely had always dreamed of that kind of life, but now she was starting to wonder if it was all her father had made it out to be.

“How bout it Keels?” Atsuma asked.

“No.” Keely said looking away. “That’s not him either.”

“What?” Koroko asked. “But that’s gotta be him. There’s no one else left here.”

“Were any of the bodies Henry’s brother?” Atsuma continued.

“No. I would’ve recognized him immediately.”

“I was afraid of this. Just because the base was slaughtered doesn’t mean that all the black bands were here. This Savvi guy may have been out on a mission... or... whatever it is black bands do when they go out.”

“So, what do we do now?” Koroko said. “Just sit here and wait for him?”

“That’s not gonna be fun.” Vatti said sitting down. “The smell of dead bodies can be really disgusting.”

Atsuma scratched his head.

“I certainly don’t want to stay here, but this is the only lead we have. But we don’t even know if that Savvi guy is coming back. He may have left because he knew the Discretes were coming here. Or he could just be dead.”

Atsuma was silent for a moment.

“Alright, let’s look around. Maybe that guy left something. If we can’t find anything, we may just have to call this a dead end.”

“Pun unintended I presume.” Koroko said with a smile.

Atsuma sighed through his nose but decided not to address the issue.

“Everyone, spread out and look around. I’m not sure if we’ll find anything, but don’t let that stop you. Any clue will make us one step closer to finding Vee. Baas.”

The Orange looked up after hearing his name.

“Diablo said Discretes notice details that others don’t pay attention to. Your eyes could be of some use.”

The group spread out and began searching. Keely went over by Sheina to calm herself down. That had been a very nerve racking experience that she could’ve gone the rest of her life without doing. Was this what the war was really like? Was this what it would be like when they went up against the Discretes? She was hoping to find comfort with Sheina, but that wasn’t helping. Sheina was just as distraught as Keely was. How would she ever fight a Discrete if she couldn’t handle herself here?

Baas wanted to kick dirt as he followed Vatti into a room. People kept mentioning that him being a Discrete would make him better, but how? Was there some bone he had to move to activate the gene? He didn’t know. It wasn’t fair that he had this power and didn’t know how to use it. Maybe Diablo was wrong and he wasn’t the one with the Discrete-Gene. Maybe it was somebody else and the Discretes were...

“Gah!” Vatti yanked Baas by his hood. “What was that for?”

“Watch where you’re going. You almost ran into a wall.”

The Orange looked in front of him. Indeed Vatti was right. Rather than walking in the door, he was about to walk into the wall.

“Sorry Vatti.”

“Try to focus for a little while. Geeze.”

“Hey, a whole base of people was just murdered. I think I have a little incentive to blank out.”

“Oh please, you’ve been out of the Center this long and you’re not used to seeing things die by now? Oh that’s right, you Oranges are babies and need a lot more time to train than us Blues.”

“Seems to me that we’re a bit more successful with our ‘’babying.’”

“Coincidence. The wars been going on forever. But do you honestly think you could beat me in a fight when all you’ve done is sit on your butt while I’m out there getting experience?”

“You mean ‘getting your feet wet?’ I don’t know about that, but Orange chose a Discrete to add to their country.”

“How many times have we fought?”

“One million.”

“And how many times have I won.”

“One million and one.”

“Exactly, I don’t care what that Diablo guy said. You can be a Discrete all you want, but you’ll never be a better fighter than me.”

“That sounds like a challenge my dear Vatti.”

“Maybe it is my not dear Baas.”

“Okay then, we’ll put my Discrete skills against your Vatti skills. First one to find the clue we’re looking for.”

“You’re such an idiot, what if there’s nothing here to find.”

“Then I win automatically.”

“The world you live in must be a wonderful place, Baas considering a person can win by losing.”

“Not a person, just me.”

The two friends laughed... and then Vatti was off. Any chance to defeat Baas was a chance she took. The Blue began searching frantically through the scattered junk in the room. A piece of clothe here, a weapon there. There wasn’t much to look at, but if it meant beating Baas, she’d look at it. Baas instinctively wanted to follow his friend’s example, but something inside him kept him from doing so. He noticed something on the wall next to what looked like a home made bed. Analysis. It’s what they trained him to do best at the center. The thing he noticed was a rather large rock. It sat at the foot of the covers on the floor. But it wasn’t the rock that was suspicious. This was a cave like structure so rocks were bound to be in it. It was the location of the rock. The covers signaled that the person’s feet would be positioned where the rock was. Why was that? If they were sleeping, it’d be easy for them to accidently kick the rock, hurting themselves immensely. It wasn’t as though the rock was too heavy to move or that a person had no choice but to put the bed there. Baas approached the rock slowly as he thought. It wasn’t completely strange. Panda slept with a bow and that made her comfortable. It could be that the person simply felt comfortable with a rock at their feet... still, it intrigued him. He slowly reached for the rock. It felt as though there was hope. Hope of what? He didn’t know. Just that hope of... something was there, but he wasn’t letting his expectations get too high. Slowly his hands grasped the rock and he lifted it off the ground. 80 pounds. He was sure it was around that weight. His body continued to move slowly as though not completely expecting to find anything. His eyes stared down at the ground as he moved the rock. Dirt. Move a little more. More dirt. Move a little more. Not dirt. Not dirt! Baas’ eyes grew wide as he saw the edge of a folded up piece of paper. He did it! He had actually found something!

“Mine!” A hand suddenly came a swooped up the paper. Vatti smiled as she scampered away with Baas’ new treasure.

“Hey!” Baas cried out. “That’s mine!”

“I don’t see your name on it.” Vatti teased. “Besides, you look like you have your hands full with that important clue of a rock.”

Baas squinted his eyes. Huh, it felt kind of weird for him to be squinting at Vatti. Usually it was the other way around. He let go of the rock and moved next to Vatti as she opened up the piece of paper. Baas began noting details. The length of the paper was longer than his and Vatti’s head, as was its width. The dirt signaled that it had been left under that rock for quite a long time, or rather, that’s where it was usually kept. Vatti, however, immediately noticed something else about the paper.

“Baas.” She said in a shocked voice. “Do you know what this is?”

“A piece of paper?”

“This... I can’t believe someone actually has this.”

“Vatti, look in the corner.”

Vatti looked in the top right corner of the paper. At first, she didn’t get what Baas was seeing, but after a second, she realized what he did.

“Atsuma!” Baas called out. He and Vatti rushed back to the center of the caves. “Atsuma!” He called again.

“Kid will you be quiet!?!” Atsuma said rushing towards Baas. “I just knocked Henry out for screaming, you want me to do that to you?”

“Atsuma.” Baas said with a smile. He handed Atsuma the paper. “Check this out.”

Atsuma snatched the paper away. After a second of looking it over, his eyes widened.

“Where did you find this?” He asked almost frantically.

“Find what?” Pandora called. She came out of a room to look at the paper.

“What is it?” Koroko called asked. He slid down a ladder and scurried over to Atsuma. “Oh, it’s a map. For a second I thought you found something important.”

“This isn’t just any map, Koroko. It’s got the locations of all the bases in Wig. Orange, Gold... everyone’s on here.”

“Greens too?” Baas asked.

“Well, no, but they don’t have any bases anyway. Still, to have every base of the three other colors...”

“Not only that.” Vatti added. “Check some of the scribbles. They’ve got schedules of all sorts of important details. The times the Golds stop patrolling. The patrol routes of Blue ships.”

“It kind of makes sense.” Atsuma said still staring at the paper. “The blacks were made of all sorts of colors. When you think about it, they’re the only ones who run an environment where multiple colors come in on a consistent basis and still need to survive. Still, it’s hard to believe.”

“It’s just a map isn’t it?” Koroko asked confused

“It’s not ‘just a map.’” Vatti said. “It’s a correct and well detailed map. There are always rumors of what the other bases are doing, but whoever wrote this actually knows what every country is doing to the letter.”

“Look at these positions Koroko.” Atsuma pointed. “Orange’s secret bases. These change just about every year and this person has all the recent ones. Our meeting points… They even have when we stormed that Blue ship last month labeled as ‘Orange trap.’ If something like this got into Orange’s hands, we’d win the war easy.”

“But it’s a good thing you guys aren’t focused on that right?” Vatti said in an almost threatening tone.

Atsuma glared at Vatti. They may have been allies now, but it wasn’t too long ago that he would’ve killed her. Now she was trying to hint at commanding him. Baas, sensed the atmosphere between his friends.

“Atsuma, the reason we wanted to show you this was because of that.” He pointed at the top right corner of the map. Atsuma looked at it. There was a circle with some letters written there. At first, he didn’t understand what he was looking at. Then, it hit him.

“Wow,” he said almost under his breath. “Those Discretes are good. No wonder we couldn’t find them”

“What?” Koroko asked confused. “What’s so important?”

“Think about it Koroko. Look at what it says.”

Koroko stared at the map. Someone circled the position on the map and wrote the word “HOME.” there.

“I’m still not getting it Ats. This is the location of someone’s home, I get that. But what does that have to do with the Discretes?”

“I’m a little bit confused too Atsuma.” Pandora said.

“It’s the position of the circle.” Atsuma explained. “Look at where that is.”

Koroko squinted as though the map were hard to see. “There? There’s nothing there but the cliffs of Wig? Wait a sec...!”

“Oh…” Pandora said as though knowing what Koroko was thinking.

“Exactly.” Atsuma said smirking. “In all the colors, no one has any territory in the cliffs. Even if you had a base there, there’s no way you’d call it ‘home.’ There’s only one color that could become a black band and call this place home.”

“A white band.” Baas said eagerly.

“That’s right.” Atsuma said still smirking. “The reason no one could ever find the Center is because the Discretes placed it in the one place no one would ever want to go. The Center is somewhere in the cliffs of Wig. That’s where we’ll find us some Discretes... and maybe we’ll find Vanessa too.”

Chapter 93 End