**Chapter 45**

“Where is he?” Vatti said, marching into the building. “Clone, where are you?” She marched forward angrily, looking around for Zordo.

“General Vatti.” Cretere said.

“Where’s the Clone?” Vatti demanded. “I’ve got an earful to give him. I am sick and tired of him summoning me from my…”

Cretere held her hand up.

“I will let you finish, but I expect you want me to answer your question as soon as possible. General Zordo, as well as the other generals, is expecting you in the Official’s office.”

Cretere gestured towards the room in the back of the building. Vatti hurried her way past and into the room. Cretere noticed that she was being followed by three unexpected visitors.

“Who are you?” She asked.

“Captain Vatti and the Forfront.” The girl in the front answered. “We’re with General Vatti.”

“I’m sure you are. But this meeting is for generals only.”

“Um… sure lady.” Carol said. “Maybe you haven’t heard, but we’re Vatti’s new team. We’ve been traveling with her for months. Whatever’s going on in there, they’re going to need us.”

“That’s nice. I can understand you just want to do your job.”

“Right, so if you can just-“

Suddenly, Carol found herself staring at the barrel of a handheld sync weapon. It felt like Cretere had used the time it took Carol to blink to pull out the weapon.

“And you can understand that I need to do my job. When Official D says generals only, I am going to make sure that order gets followed.”

The woman’s tone was dead serious. Carol

“Mom!” Came a voice. Portia walked up to her mother. “Can you help me with something? I need someone to check my calculations.”

Portia turned and looked at the people her mother was threatening.

“Oh no.” She said.

“Good to see you too, Portia.” Napp joked.

“Dear, are these friends of yours?” Cretere asked. Her eyes refused to focus on anything else in the room.

“Yes, Portia.” Carol said nervously. “Tell your mother how we’re fellow students and about all the good times we had in Education. Please?”

Portia’s eyes looked to the side as though she were trying to remember.

“Shoot her.”

Napp snickered uncontrollably when he heard that.

“I would love to shoot them dear, but I can only justify it if they’re being insubordinate. Are you being in insubordinate?”

“That won’t be necessary.” Tsudo said calmly. “We get the message. No meeting for us.”

Cretere put her weapon away and grabbed her daughter by the shoulder.

“What is this project, dear? Are you sure I can understand it?”

“It should be simple enough tech.” Portia said smiling. “I just need a second pair of eyes.”

The two entered their own world as they walked away.

“I can’t believe she pulled a gun to my face.” Carol said.

“You let your guard down.” Tsudo said. “Besides, she is a superior officer in this regards. If she hadn’t pulled a weapon on you, I would’ve been disappointed.”

Carol rubber her nose. The weapon had barely touched it, but it seemed to have left a lingering itch.

“Well, Vatti’s probably going to be in there for a while.” Napp said. “How about we take a well deserved break?”

“Fine.” Tsudo said. “We need to be well rested in case Vatti needs to leave anyway. Just make sure that you’re ready to go when that happens.”

Napp pumped his fist in excitement. He quickly left his friends in search of a place to sleep.

With Napp gone, Carol and Tsudo began wandering around aimlessly. After a few minutes, the two traveled up the stairs. On the fourth floor, Carol pointed to something that interested them both.

“Come on, Ryan, just let me take a peek.” Henry screamed.

“No.” Ryan said firmly.

“Ryan, he’s my dad.”

“So you’ve been telling me.” Ryan said. “But I have my orders from Zordo. If you really want to get pass me, go talk to him.”

“This is so stupid! If our roles were switched, I’d let you in.”

Ryan was silent for a moment.

“That’s not a good thing, Henry.”

Henry was getting angrier. The chain that was usually around his neck was twirling viciously around his right index finger.

“Having some trouble with your team, Ryan?”

Ryan and Henry turned to see Tsudo and Carol.

“Oh, this is just what we need.” Henry said. He brushed passed the girls and marched into a room a few doors down.

“Well, that’s one way to take out the trash.” Carol snickered.

“If you don’t have business here, leave.” Ryan said. With Henry gone, he could lean up against the railing without worrying about someone trying to get into the room he was guarding. His body showed all the signs of frustration and angered Tsudo had been trained to recognize.

“Ooh, feisty.” Carol continued. “I have a captain, Ryan, and it isn’t you.”

Tsudo noticed Ryan’s shaking fist. She had seen him angry plenty of times, usually she was the one causing the anger, but this was different. Whatever was bothering him, it was doing so in a different way than she did.

“Carol.” Tsudo said plainly. “Go take a walk for a bit.”

Carol gave a distraught look at Tsudo. She was confused, but did as she was told. Tsudo was now left alone with Ryan.

“Ryan. You’ve got something you want to talk about?”

“Not to you.”

“Naturally. You and I aren’t exactly the best of friends. This is probably something more up Zordo’s alley but I’m guessing he’s got so much on his plate that you wouldn’t dare bother him about something stupid.”

Tsudo leaned up against the railing next to Ryan.

“Fine, you don’t have to talk, but let me do some guessing. Henry isn’t acting like a soldier. In fact, he’s acting like a spoiled brat. And you, being the person responsible for his behavior, are taking the full force of that attitude. It’s almost as if since you’ve been promoted to captain, he’s become an entirely different person.”

Ryan didn’t answer. Of course, his body signs were so obvious, he didn’t have to say anything. Tsudo thought of plenty of things she could say at this point. She knew that no matter what, Ryan would most likely dismiss any words, giving that it was coming from her. But, at the very least, she wanted to make sure that whatever happened, didn’t happen because she refused to speak up.

“Do you remember when we all met three years ago? Zordo, in what I still think to be a questionable way of teaching, gave us all a week to get to know each other and pick our groups, groups that we’d be spending the rest of our soldier lives with.”

Tsudo looked at Ryan, noticing his eye movement. He was indeed remembering.

“I, of course, was determined to get the best team in all of Green. I wasn’t gonna have any slackers holding me back. I had such a hard time finding people who were focused and willing. Then I found you. You had such a relaxed attitude, but you did everything I asked and you did it to the best of your ability. If you couldn’t do it, you explained where you were lacking and learned from whatever mistakes you made. Back then, I knew, that you and I belonged on the same team. With us two together, there was no way we wouldn’t dominate the other Greens and eventually win the war. And along came Henry. When I declared I was gonna beat everyone, he wanted so badly to be on my team. Yet, he couldn’t do the simplest of things. Remember what happened next?”

More silence.

“That’s right, for the first time, I saw what worthless trash Henry was, and I told him exactly what I thought. Despite that, my words barely phased Henry. He said he’d show me and prove how good he was. He’d make a team that would dominate everyone, especially mine.

And you, right then and there, looked me in the eye and told me you were going to be on his team. That if I couldn’t respect others, than you couldn’t respect me. You decided to be Henry friend, and you two went and formed your own team, while I had to find someone else.

Of all the things you’ve done, I think that was your biggest mistake.”

“So what’s the moral of the story, Tsudo?” Ryan finally said. “Are you trying to tell me you were right and that Henry is nothing but trash.”

“While true that may be, that’s not my point. That day, when I rejected Henry, he didn’t suffer for it. You did. You joined a worse team because Henry couldn’t keep up”

Ryan chuckled mockingly.

“That’s some ego you’ve got, you know that?”

“I’m serious, Ryan. I wouldn’t trade my team for anything, but you and I would’ve dominated the field if we had stayed together. Instead, you stuck up for Henry from criticism he deserved.”

“No one deserves to be called trash.”

“Except people who are trash. Criticism is supposed to hurt because it helps us improve. Henry is immune to that and that is not a good thing. As long as he keeps that mentality, he won’t get better. Henry’s not a different person, Ryan, you’re just looking at him from a different position now. You weren’t seeing it before because you were equals, but now that you’re responsible for him, above him, you’re going to notice it more and more. The more he refuses to improve, the more you’re going to pay for it.”

“What do you expect me to do? Treat him like he’s worthless. He’s my friend. Even if he wasn’t I don’t treat people the way you do.”

“You’re a captain, now, Ryan. You do what’s best for your team. If you want to do what’s best for Henry, be his captain first and his friend second. If you don’t, eventually he’s going to make a mistake so big, the price is gonna be too much for you.”

Ryan once again fell silent. Tsudo expected that. This may have been news he needed, but not news he wanted.

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“Clone!” Vatti shouted as she entered the room.

“Good, Vatti, you’re here.” Zordo said. He stood between Magatha and D; Savvi, Decson and Eve were all there as well. The stirkfur the Seconds kept as a pet was sitting near Savvi.

“Clone, I put up with your meetings. I put up with you making me drag kids around. Why in the Wig are you interrupting me now!? It takes me weeks to get here and need I remind you that I do not have time to waste!”

“I called you yesterday.”

“Not the point, Clone! I am here! And when I’m here, I’m not out there! I need to be out there!”

Vatti let her shouting end. Between traveling there and her anger, her adrenaline had been pumping at full speed. Finally, it was beginning to settle down.

“Are you done?” Zordo said.

“No.” Vatti said. She crossed her arms and pouted. “But I want to get out of here as soon as possible, so just get on with this emergency meeting.”

“Thank you. D.”

Official D straightened himself.

“Things have taken an interesting turn much sooner than I expected. I sent Zordo and his team on a scouting mission a few weeks ago. They returned with the person you all know as Atsuma.”

“Atsuma?” Decson asked. “Atsuma of Orange?”

“The very same.” D said. “The Discretes apparently had him captive.”

“What?” Vatti asked. “You said he was dead. You told me they were all dead!”

“I miscalculated.”

“Miscalculated? You’re a Discrete! How could you miscalculate!?!”

“Oh boy, she’s more worked up than usual.” Savvi said to Eve.

“And that’s saying something given this is Vatti we’re talking about.” Eve grinned.

“You told me they were dead. You lied to me!” Vatti screamed.

“When I carried you away from the Discretes, they were on the verge of killing everyone there. There was no logical reason to assume they left anyone alive. I don’t know the purpose, but for some reason they kept him alive.”

“Where did you find him?” Vatti demanded.

“The Discretes have a main base of operations due west of here.” Zordo said. “My team was scouting it when…”

Before he could finish, Vatti turned towards the exit.

“Where are you going, Vatti?” Zordo asked.

“To that base.”

Vatti found D’s hand on her shoulder.

“That’s not a wise. It is a central point for the Discretes. If I’m correct, they keep about twenty inside at all times.”

Vatti yanked her shoulder away. She did not want him touching her.

“Just more Discretes for me to kill.”

“Vatti, I know you want to kill the Discretes, but this is suicide.” Decson said.

“This isn’t about the Discretes.” Magatha said. “Our defense general is hoping Atsuma wasn’t the only survivor.”

The room became quiet as the realization became clear.

“It’s not really surprising.” Magatha continued. “When has Vatti done anything that wasn’t a direct result of caring about… what was his name?”

“Baas.” Vatti growled.

“Vatti, even if Baas is alive, you storming in there isn’t going to save him.” Decson said. “It’s more likely to get both of you killed.”

Vatti did not want to listen to Decson. Since she was a child she had been taught strategy. She knew her friend was absolutely right. But the thought that Baas, after all this time, could still be alive…

“What Atsuma knows, be it about Baas, or anything else, is irrelevant at the moment.” Zordo said. “He’s unconscious at the moment and can’t answer any questions.”  
  
“Okay.” Decson said. “We don’t know why they kept him alive, but what do they know. They not only felt the need to keep him alive, but bring him down here? They could keep him captured anywhere. On the surface, at the Center…”  
  
“Not only that.” Magatha interrupted. “The Discretes have control of a great deal of the west of the Source. Even if they had to bring him down here, why keep him at that location.”

“I believe I may know.” Zordo said. “When I found Atsuma, his body was abnormally cold and he was barely conscious. He was most likely cryo-frozen.”

“That would explain it.” Savvi said. “The tech required for that is most likely something they don’t keep lying around in the Center. They’d need access to temperature controls.”

“Not to mention, highly advanced medical equipment.” Decson said.

“Exactly.” Zordo said. “The current Discrete headquarters is located within an old food storage facility, equipped with freezing technology needed for the process. One of the surrounding buildings is a hospital.”

“That’s fascinating, Zordo.” Magatha said sarcastically. “But you wouldn’t have summoned us all here for something that could’ve been discussed over the collar radios.”

“You know me too well.” Zordo said. He picked up his Display and sent files to everyone in the room.

“When we brought Atsuma back, I examined everything about him trying to figure out what the Discretes could possibly want. Here are the results of his physical exam. Of course, he’s unconscious, so I couldn’t perform every test I needed to, but the results were startling.”

The generals all examined their personal displays. At first, no one said anything. Vatti, Savvi and Magatha weren’t even certain what they were looking at. Eventually, however, Decson realized what she was looking at.

“Oh. That… is… I don’t know what to say.”

“Please share, Decson.” Savvi said. “Not all of us are good with medical data.”

“Well, since Zordo did the basic tests, it’s uncertain, but Atsuma’s test results are impressive. For someone his age, he’s a bit too healthy.”

“Is that really abnormal?” Magatha said. “On the surface, Atsuma always had the reputation of appearing younger than he actually is.”

“Yes, but this is too an absurd degree. According to these tests, over the last two years of being frozen, he’s gotten stronger, faster, more durable, it’s like his body just got naturally stronger simply from being alive. It’s almost like… he’s a Discrete.”

Vatti twitched when she heard the word.

“Wait, you’re not trying to say his Wig-Gene changed, are you?” Savvi asked. “I thought that was impossible.”

“Before the Wig-Gene was invented, what we consider normal was considered impossible.” Discrete D said. “Even the Discretes of old didn’t have a full understanding of the drug they introduced. It’s quite possible. I’ve checked Atsuma’s blood myself.”

Chapter 45 End