

KEEPER 115

Chapter 115: 115. THE ART OF FLATTERY

"Is it me, or is the air here cold?" Ulekai said, pressing himself into the centre of the formation.

"Coward!" Maita sneered. They were not running and instead walked slowly.

Kaka had fallen at the back, and kiuga walked beside him. They were not far apart, but sagiri was walking at the very front beside Lotaga.

"sagiri the blind, anyone in your radius yet?" kiuga yelled from the back of the formation.

"If there was, you have alerted them with your big mouth," Maita snapped. He was more irritable than Kaka at the moment. The boy was hungry, and sagiri was sure that, at that moment, if he was given food in exchange to kill kiuga, he could have done it.

The bickering between the group went on with moments of silence in between. The smell of blood had gotten thicker now, and sagiri was in awe that Kaka was able to walk, having been losing blood for three days. He was still walking, though he had not spoken a word for hours, as if he was trying to bite down his pain. It was forbidden in many clans in the west and north for a man to show emotion or even cry. The least he could do was stay silent as he suffered. Not that sagiri could know what crying felt like because he had never cried, but if it was the same as laughing, then he could only imagine how hard it was to keep it in.

The team had been walking for over an hour and a half when sagiri finally stopped. He had finally perceived a presence. The group behind him came to a stop, too.

"How many vaara out?" Kiuga asked in a small voice.

"10," sagiri answered.

"How many?" Lotaga asked.

"Six," Sagiri answered.

"Well, it's too late to turn back now, let's keep going. Remember, you just tell them we are passing through to Ko'alsi War headquarters by the order of the council of the ten schools." Lotaga repeated the words he had told sagiri before the start of their journey.

"Yes," sagiri answered, but he knew he was going to have to disobey a direct order again. If they just asked to walk through and were allowed without a hitch, then that was worse because Kaka could not take it anymore, and he could die because they had three more days of walking nonetheless.

Sagiri heard them before he saw them. They stepped out of the darkness, their blades drawn, obviously hearing the approaching. They must have been warriors of Zonuvaki on guard duty.

The group came to a stop in front of the six who were towering. They might not have been as big as the Bami clan, but they were still big men.

"Sikiha," Sagiri stood at the front of the group and greeted the Zonuvaki in their tongue. The six men hesitated but did not put away their weapons. sagiri accompanied the greeting with a deep bow, both hands to both his knees, a greeting common to the young people used to greet elders. It was clear that the six before them were in their thirties and above. They, of course, recognized the greeting, and being a little dark apart from the light coming from the festival a few vaara beyond, they hesitated after such a display of their core culture's respectful greeting.

The other boys followed the greeting and even lotaga but it was not the time to correct him.

"Are you a Zonuvaki?" the oldest and obvious leader asked in the Zonuvaki tongue.

"I wish I were." sagiri had read a lot about the art of negotiation and flattery in the central Pentagon library, and it had come in handy. "I love the language, and so I learned it at school," sagiri continued, still holding the position.

"You can stand up straight. and talk to us," the leader said, sheathing his weapon, but his lackeys still had their weapons pulled out.

"Why are you here at this time?" he asked as sagiri rose to face him. The man's brown pupils were narrowed as if he did not trust easily, but he was giving him a chance to convince him. Speaking zonuvaki tongue was a plus.

"My squad was only passing through to get to Ko'alsi city. My team wanted to sleep outside your tribe's territory till morning, but I have always loved the Zonuvaki tribe and their traditions, so I insisted we join the festivities, then we would be on our way in the morning," Sagiri answered. He was only glad none on his team could understand what he was saying, or they could have torn him to shreds.

"You wish not to pass through but trespass on our festivities?" The man beside the leader asked, and sagiri could sense a little hostility rolling off of him, but there was a hint of pride, too.

"I would not dare be that bold. I am an orphan who was raised without a clan or tribe. I have always wanted to have a clan I belong to. I only desire to see what festivities in tribes look like," sagiri said. This time, he was not lying, and he had only felt such a feeling when he danced in that sand desert in the echo images the archive showed him.

"You do not have a clan or a tribe? what a shame," the leader said, but he could sense that the hostility had depreciated.

"Where do you come from?" another man to the far left of the team asked.

"We are cadets of the Galka War Academy, and we are on our way to the Zandeko'alsi war headquarters," sagiri answered honestly. It was only a matter of time before they saw the logos at the back of their combat coats if they hadn't already.

"You being of that cage academy should know that it is a mistake to pass through Zonuvaki at night. why not just go through instead, but beg to stay?" the leader asked again, not understanding why Sagiri would want to stay.

"To get a taste of the magic of being connected to a tribe. is worth dying for, for people like me without clan or tribe or roots," sagiri said, quoting the words of some poet who had neither clan nor tribe and just wandered all over Tagayia and other countries to taste their cultures, traditions, and food, even those that were the most warring and unwelcoming. He believed that it was worth dying to have a taste of what a tribe and clan were because he never had one.

"You are a weird kid, aren't you?" The leader asked, and Sagiri knew he had finally managed to sway him. "Do your teammates wish to die for your wish to come true, too?" he asked again, and sagiri knew if Kaka could hear the language, let alone his bleeding, beaten, and bruised body, he could have killed him for sure.

"They have promised to show me their tribes after the final exam. my wish is their wish," sagiri said, and the man chuckled, making the others look between the two wearily. They did not know that they had just been sold.

"What can your group add to our ceremony?" The man asked.

"If you have blades and spears, they can dance with blades and spears for you. But they are hungry and thirsty," Sagiri bargained.

"He is a canning one. He bargains even when he is the one who craves to see our ways," another man in the group said.

"It is good to know that the cage up north raises birds that can actually fly. This one can survive when he leaves the cage," the leader said. "What is your name?"

"I am Sagiri," sagiri answered without hesitation.

"I smell blood," the one who had been the most silent suddenly said, and sagiri froze.

"That is their problem. Tenko, show Sagiri and his group to the festivities. Tell Taku that I am the one who allowed them in. Make sure Sagiri gets to enjoy our traditions and way of life so he can write a poem like Selangi," the leader said, and sagiri knew the man knew he had quoted a poem, but chose to let it pass.

sagiri bowed in greeting again before he turned to face the group.

"The instructor remains here with us," the leader added, and Sagiri bowed again. It seemed the leader knew much about how the Galka war academy worked, but it was only natural, seeing as most warriors passed through war academies.

"Lotaga, they ask that you stay here, the rest come with," is all sagiri said as he moved to walk behind the man named Tenko.

The group did not know what they had talked about, but it is not like they could just turn around and run.

The man called Tenko was the youngest in the group, and the one who had smelled the blood. He led the group silently through the winding path that led away from the main road for another thirty minutes. sagiri only hoped that Lotaga could survive the night, but it was too late to worry now.

It did not take long before they started descending a small ridge and then saw the festivities in full swing down below in the first village of the Zonuvaki tribe. Young women were dancing in a circle dressed in colorful clothes, and the young men stood outside the circle, humming and moving their heads to the rhythm.

"I will take the one who is bleeding to a healer, the rest of you will go to the springs at the edge of the village," Tenko said to sagiri before he turned to Kaka.

"You come with me," is all he said in korun tongue. sagiri looked at kiuga and a silent understanding passed between them.

"I will come with you," kiuga said, and Tenko continued walking in front of them, deeper and deeper into the outskirts of the village.

Sagiri only hoped nothing could go wrong, and he would not be the reason someone died