

KEEPER 156

Chapter 156: FAREWELL AND GRIEF

The word trembled, and it was clear to everyone now that something was up as all present turned to look at him as if he had gone mad.

Do not grieve. She whispered to his mind.

Pain twisted in Sagiri's chest as she watched her life fade away. How had she not noticed that even her shape-shifting was an illusion? She had wanted him to believe she was strong and well, and he had.

"What happened to you?" he whispered.

Her great eyes softened.

Time... has come. I have finished my task. I join my mate now.

Her body trembled as if something inside her was fading. Sagiri felt the connection between them fraying like a rope being cut strand by strand. Then something flashed across his mind. A memory. A memory he never knew.

A desert serpent...only gives its egg away when it is dying.

His eyes widened. It was as if he had known it all along, and now that it was repeating itself in his mind, it was torment.

"No." Sagiri roared, and the ground under him shook slightly. Myama's voice grew faint.

You carry... the future of my kind...

Her golden eyes dimmed further.

Guard it well.

The wind across the dunes began to fade. Her form flickered like a mirage breaking apart. Sagiri felt panic rise in his chest.

"No! wait! Myama, I said I'd get you out," he didn't care that everyone was watching.

Her final whisper reached him. Soft. Gentle and warm.

Farewell... child.

And then the desert vanished. Sagiri staggered violently. Pain tore through his head like a blade splitting his skull. His knees buckled as the vision collapsed.

"Myama!" he called again, his voice foreign to him. He had never experienced loss to such intensity before. A scream tore from his throat before he could stop it. Soldiers present froze, and his squadmates started to jump out of the carriages. Sagiri clutched his head as grief crashed through him like a wave.

"No!" Another pained wail tore through his throat. He shoved past the carriage guards suddenly, stumbling toward the fortress doors.

"She's dying!" His voice cracked with desperation. "I have to go back!" Everyone stepped out of his way, not understanding what was happening.

"Sagiri!" N'avr yelled, "Hold him!" he had immediately understood when sagiri said Myama's name. After all, only a queen desert serpent could be called that. One warrior tried to grab him, but Sagiri fought them with wild strength, panic burning through him.

"Let me go!" he snarled. His voice broke into a raw scream that echoed across the courtyard.

"NO!" Every head in the fortress was looking up and down, but they could see nothing. Captain Salka stepped forward sharply, eyes narrowing. Because the grief in Sagiri's voice was not the grief of someone pretending. It sounded like someone who had just lost something precious. It was a morn, and everyone present was familiar with such a cry. And no one in the courtyard understood why or who he mourned.

Sagiri struggled against the warriors holding him, his heart aching with grief.

"Let me go!"

His voice cracked with grief and rage as he twisted violently, trying to break free. The fortress gates loomed only a short distance away, but it felt like an entire world stood between him and them.

"She's dying!" he shouted hoarsely. "I have to go back!" Most of the courtyard had turned to stare now. Even a few lingering council members who had not yet left the fortress grounds. N'varu moved first. He stepped forward quickly, grabbing Sagiri by the shoulders.

"Sagiri!" he hissed urgently. "Listen to me!" Sagiri barely seemed to see him. His eyes were wild, unfocused, searching for something that only he could see. He was understanding and feeling grief for the first time. Not the grief he perceived in others, but his own. It was the most torturous feeling he had ever felt.

"You don't understand," Sagiri said through clenched teeth. "Move."

"You're losing control. Everyone is watching." N'varu tightened his grip. "Myama did not sacrifice herself just to see you waste it. She was wheeling to die for you," N'varu said. His words might have been meant to comfort, but they drove sagiri even more over the edge. Why did she have to die for his sake?

"I said move." Sagiri's chest heaved. When N'varu didn't, Sagiri shoved him. It was not even a full strike but just a desperate push, yet N'varu was thrown aside as if he weighed nothing. He slid back a few feet, stumbling across the stone and barely catching himself before hitting the ground. Several warriors froze in surprise. Sagiri didn't notice he was too deep in his grief. He staggered forward again toward the fortress doors.

"Stop him!" N'varu shouted. He cursed under his breath and rushed back when no one moved quickly enough, as if they wanted to see what he could do next. Kiuga moved with him. Together, they grabbed Sagiri from both sides.

"Sagiri, stop!" Kiuga barked.

"Get a hold of yourself!" N'varu added.

Sagiri fought like a cornered animal.

"LET ME GO!"

His strength surged again, and he shoved the two of them back. The two of them were thrown apart violently. Kiuga slid across the stone courtyard, and N'varu crashed into a supply crate hard enough to splinter the wood.

Murmurs rippled through the watching warriors.

"That boy..."

"Did you see that?"

Sagiri barely slowed. He took another step toward the fortress, determined to get to the containment chamber. Then a shadow moved. Captain Salka stepped directly into his path. Sagiri tried to shove past him, but Salka caught him easily. One hand clamped onto Sagiri's arm. The other locked around his shoulder. Like iron.

"Enough," he said.

"Let me go!" Sagiri struggled violently.

Salka didn't budge, but he let out a sharp intake of breath. Then he shifted his stance and locked Sagiri in a more crushing restraint. Sagiri thrashed, fury and grief burning through him.

"You don't understand!" he snarled.

Salka's voice remained calm.

"I do. Whatever you have lost, you can't lose control now. Not here. Listen to your friends." His grip tightened slightly. "Now fighting." Sagiri still struggled, muscles trembling with wild energy.

Several soldiers moved closer nervously.

"If he keeps going, should we restrain him?" one asked. They were all looking at sagiri as if he had gone mad. Before anyone could decide, someone moved.

Senraki.

He had been standing quietly near the carriage the entire time. Watching. Now he stepped forward. He walked past the soldiers, past Kiuga and Nvaru, who were still catching their breath, and stopped beside Salka. Sagiri was still fighting the captain's grip.

"Hold him steady," Senraki said quietly.

Salka didn't ask questions. He tightened his hold. Sagiri turned his head slightly to look at Senraki, and in that brief moment, Senraki's fingers moved. Just once. A light touch at the side of Sagiri's neck. Barely visible. Barely even a movement, and Sagiri froze. His body went still instantly. The fury vanished from his eyes like a flame suddenly snuffed out. Then his legs gave out, but Salka caught him before he could collapse. Sagiri's head dropped forward. Unconscious.

A stunned silence fell over the courtyard.

"You could have just let me put him to sleep. I was about to anyway," Salka scoffed, carrying a sagiri hanging on one arm like he always did.

"Be faster next time." Senraki threw his words at Akama this time. Senraki had already stepped back, waving at the council member with a smile before His hands rested calmly behind his back as if he had done nothing at all. "The boy has been under stress since he came to this fortress; he must have taken all the pressure badly," he added, bowing sarcastically to all council members who were still staring. He was insufferable.

"What did you do to him?" N'varu asked

"A nerve technique," he said simply. "He will wake up in an hour or two, by then we will be out of galka

Most of the warriors looked confused. Because almost no one had actually seen him do anything. N'varu rubbed his shoulder where he had been thrown and stared at Sagiri's unconscious form. Salka lifted Sagiri easily and carried him toward the carriage.