

KEEPER 201

Chapter 201: TRAPS AND BOREDOM

The team finished setting up traps as silently as possible and perched in trees. Kiuga was perched upside down, resting his weight on the back of his knees. The squad had been silent for a few minutes now, and their postures had shifted from tense to relaxed.

"Sagiri the blind," Kiuga suddenly whispered, looking up at Sagiri, who was perched upright on a branch beside the one Kiuga was dangling from. Sagiri turned his head to look at him, and he was smiling widely. Being upside down made the smile even more creepy, but then, when wasn't his smile creepy? "You know if you win against the Tsanka tribe girl, the challenge continues till a time she beats you, then she will marry you?" Kiuga continued in a loud whisper. Sagiri was already confused by the challenge and the rules, and now he was even more confused. The rules were much more treacherous than the current game. So was he supposed to win or lose?

"How do I get out of the challenge?" Sagiri asked.

"You can't. But if you fail terribly in this test, she might stop considering you a worthy life partner." Kiuga said.

"That is not an option," Sagiri said. This was a final exam, and most of his teammates had been training for this for the past four years. Making them fail just to get out of a challenge was out of the question. If his benefactor did not kill him first, Kaka Asakana would peel his skin from bone. Maita could help dismember him piece by piece. Speak of being stuck between a rock and an even bigger rock. Worse of all, she had to be the niece of the kun of the Tsanka. He would be leaving for the south anyway. It won't matter.

Suddenly, Sagiri tensed, and with a finger gesture to his lips, Kiuga fell silent and halted like a bat remaining completely still. Minutes ticked by, and Sagiri could now feel more than a dozen heartbeats walking slowly to the place from different directions. The runner hare rabbit species was too paranoid and restless, so it was important that the team remained completely still and silent. Soon, a ball of fur suddenly burst from behind the tree line. An ash grey ball of fur. It was still panicked from the chase, but it suddenly calmed down, and its fur that was standing on end from the chase smoothed down, giving it a shade of black. Its beady red eyes against the colour of its coat under the canopies made it look more enteral. Perhaps the one who set the exam was a rabbit lover and did not want them to be killed.

It was so beautiful, and Sagiri could suddenly perceive the excitement and warmth rolling off his teammates. Whether it was from their beauty or from the tag secured around its neck, it was still up for

debate. The squad was perched in a circle around the place, but they could wait for a signal from Sagiri to finally move. Sagiri raised his hand to signal they wait, and they waited. Minutes later, another joined, and the excitement from the group was now through the roof. It was two out of the thousand they were meant to catch, but their current excitement made it seem like it was the thousandth rabbit. Besides the traps, they had placed uprooted grass in piles, and the two rabbits began to move toward the traps.

Minutes ticked by, and more rabbits joined. There were now a dozen, and the first two were already inside the traps. The process went on for almost an hour, and by now over a hundred rabbits had joined the party. Sagiri waited till the traps could not take any more before he lowered his hand. The traps were made in such a way that they were cylindrical in shape. Banga had bound the stick-made cylinders in such a way that the rabbits could enter from both sides, but could not leave because of the inverted sharp sticks facing the inside. It made it easy to go and hard to come out.

The team jumped down in excitement, and at the sudden noise, the rabbits' fur turned ash grey again with fear as they tried to escape, but couldn't. It was as easy as pie to strip them of the tags. In total, they collected a hundred and twenty tags from the rabbits. Six had already been stripped of the tags.

"This feels way too easy," Kiuga whined, but everyone ignored him. The team set the rabbits free and returned to their positions after splitting the tags equally. Most of the team secured the tags on their upper arms except for Kaka. His forearms were just too big, and he resorted to putting them on his wrists, the same as Maita. The team fell back to silence, and after a few more minutes, more rabbits started pouring into the place. The process went on and off for a few more hours, with the team waiting for the rabbits to be trapped. Gather the tags from the ones who had tags, and then release the rest. The process was so boring that Ulekai had forgotten all his fear and started dozing off.

By the time nightfall came, the team had gathered 63 tags each, and more than being hungry, they were bored. The sigils on the chest's red glow had started to become more prominent now in the dark.

"I'm so hungry I could eat a runner hare rabbit," Kiuga yawned loudly. "We have already passed the average passing mark. Why don't we fire the red flare? Then I can get to eat this beautiful creature," Kiuga said, looking at the runner rabbit he was betting on with his hands. He was now sitting upright on a branch.

"You are a monster," Ulekai said. "How can you bear to look at this beauty and think it's food?" He had been completely swept off his feet by the rabbit's beauty, and he now wanted to quit being a warrior and keep rabbits till he died of old age.

"How am I a monster? Would you rather I die of hunger?" Kiuga clutched the rabbit even tighter as if he wanted to break its neck and pet it at the same time.

"Why don't you kill a hundred of them and fail the test?" Kaka snickered.

More rabbits were coming in, but the more time went by, the fewer the tags on them. There were a hundred and fifty squads hunting, and it was safe to assume that there were other good teams too. Not all squads were as foolish as to chase the runner hare species, and it was even safer to assume there were other teams with the same strategy as them.

"There are not many rabbits coming in. We should change our position deeper into this terrain," Kiuga suddenly said on a serious note.

"I think we should just wait here. We have already passed the test." Ulekai said.

"Sagiri said there are snakes to the east, so we are continuing south. All the rabbits here are tagless," Kiuga said. "Sagiri, any grave scale further south?" Kiuga asked, turning to sagiri. Sagiri had not stopped perceiving their surroundings even for a moment ever since the exercise started, and he could perceive snakes to the east and big cats to the west, but he had not perceived a two-headed beast.

"No," he answered immediately.

"Then it's set. We move south for a while, set traps, and find a place to camp till midnight. The team moved south for a bit before coming face-to-face with an abandoned cave. It was not big, and it looked like it was formed from the ancient tree roots in the area. A cave from roots?

Suddenly, the archive stirred violently, and sagiri retracted his senses. He could not tell if it was the residual of the poison in his blood or something else, but this one was accompanied by some bad feeling.

"What is it?" N'varu, who had been watching him intently, was the first to notice.

"You can rest. We can watch our own backs," Kaka said, shoving past him to be the first to enter the cave. Kiuga was already assigning duties of trap setting and the first watch. The exam seemed hard, but it had turned out to be almost too easy. Well, with Kiuga in charge, Sagiri's knowledge and sensory abilities, and Banga's innovation, it was bound to be easy. Sagiri walked to a stream and poured water on his face, but the odd feeling did not recede for a moment. He walked back and rested his back on a fat root of the ancient tree, but he could not rest or relax, even if he wanted to.

Something was wrong, or perhaps was about to go horribly wrong.

Chapter 202: RESTLESSNESS

Sagiri tried to calm himself and regulate his breathing, but he could not get rid of the visible restlessness that was suddenly hanging around him. He had been resting for half an hour now, and darkness had blanketed the horizon, yet he knew he could not keep resting for long, however. Not knowing your surroundings in a place like the outer nonagon. Even resting for a few minutes the last time almost cost them a life. He pushed his senses out, but there was nothing. It was silent, almost too silent, and it made his restlessness rise. N'varu, Kaka, Maita, and Zolinka were on the first watch, and he had a bad feeling about it. They were not far off, but they were at least over fifty feet away.

"Kiuga. Pull them back," Sagiri said, and Kiuga did not even question him before he put two fingers between his lips and sucked in air. A whistle loud enough for the boys on patrol tore the silent night for a moment before there was silence again. Kiuga knew better than to question Sagiri by now. There was silence for a few more minutes before there was movement. Kaka was the first one to arrive silently. Maita arrived two heartbeats later, and five more heartbeats later, Zolinka burst into the small clearing in front of the cave.

Silence

There was more silence as the group waited for N'varu to arrive. Everyone had gathered at Kiuga's whistle, even those not on watch duty. Another few moments went by, and N'varu still did not show up. The restlessness Sagiri had been feeling had festered into full panic. He pushed his senses out again, but he could not perceive N'varu out there as if he had just vanished. He knew N'varu was able to hide his presence sometimes, but now could not possibly be one of those times.

"Impossible!!" Sagiri said in a panicked tone.

"What is it?" Kiuga asked with urgency. In the first few minutes of silence, a dozen or so runner hare rabbits had been caught in the traps, and now they were going even more wild than ever with fear. "I can't perceive him. It is as if he had vanished," Sagiri said.

"You said you can only perceive the living..." Ulekai started, and everyone turned to him.

"Shut up!" Maita was the one to snap at him.

"He was scouting the area we came from," Bukata said.

"Aren't the instructors supposed to know where we are and the watchers circle?" Zazarie wondered out loud. Just then, everyone looked down at their sigils on their chests, and they were dead.

"W-What? What is happening?" Ulekai said in a broken voice. Right at the moment, a green flare tore through the sky far away. Seconds later, white flares went off, making the sky light up like daylight all over the place. The closest one was some 20V out. This was the signal that the instructor was supposed to respond in case the watcher's eye was down. Their firing in response was them showing their positions around the perimeter. It was now barely eight, and they had four hours on them before the exam could come to an end. No red flare had been fired yet, which only meant no team had forfeited the test or collected a thousand tags yet.

"I think the watcher's eye is down," Banga said, the fact that everyone already knew.

"Didn't that rank one innovator say the watchers circle could not go down unless..." Zazarie started, then trailed off.

"You think one of the field anchors has been messed with?" Bukata asked.

"Sometimes, every machine can fail. The eye has been watching more than a thousand of us and even instructors, perhaps it needs a reset," Banga said.

"That does not explain N'varu's absence. I don't like the coincidence," Kiuga said.

"Perhaps he went to relieve himself," Ulekai said, and it sounded as if he wanted to convince himself of the best possible excuse for Nvaru's disappearance.

"N'varu could never go anywhere without Sagiri. He is basically his shadow," Kaka said, and everyone nodded. Calling N'varu Sagiri's shadow was the most accurate description of a sand shade.

"I will go look for him," Sagiri said, and he meant it.

"No, you won't," suddenly a voice said from behind the tree line before N'varu emerged. He looked like he had been in a rough battle, and he was staggering over. He had a couple of dozen tags on his wrist.

"Why do you look like that?" Sagiri asked, hurrying over to help him.

"I might have gone further off to track a movement and ended up falling into a swamp a bit east of where we were. Indeed, it's as sagiri said. There were snakes in that area, swamp snakes. Turns out they had hunted, drowned, and had been feasting on the rabbits, and I collected this," N'varu said, lifting his hand to showcase the bands. Sagiri helped him sit by a thick protruding root before he stepped back.

The story N'varu was saying did not sound like N'varu at all. It sounded like something Kaka could do or Maita.

"You are lying," Sagiri said after a moment. He had known N'varu long enough, and that man usually gave nothing away and was tight-lipped, but feelings could not lie. However, right now, N'varu had hidden them together with his presence.

"I might have to agree with Sagiri on this. N'varu, you are patient and calm as an assassin, as Lotaga said. There is no way you could have followed a sound and fallen into a swamp." Kiuga said.

"Zolinka, check him," Sagiri said, and before Zolinka could move, N'varu lifted his hand.

"I have said I am okay. Whatever I might be hiding or not will not affect my performance as a squad member. We have tags to collect, and we have already caused too much commotion." N'varu said, and if anyone thought he had been hiding something before, now they were sure he was hiding something.

It was also quite a coincidence that he was gone when the watchers' circle was down and just happened to come back right on time as the sigils lit up again in response to the watcher's eye.

Sagiri was not convinced, and neither were most of the squad members, but they chose to let it go. They resorted to setting traps and lying low just outside the root cave and on top of it. An hour ticked by, and then another, and soon it was ten with only two hours to go. In that duration, they had collected more tags, and now they were at 76 each. Sagiri, however, was not concentrated on the test. Things he feared were going too well that they were at risk of going bad, or perhaps they already had. His restlessness had grown even higher. He kept his eyes on N'varu, who had his eyes closed the entire time, and even more odd, he had not moved a muscle. His heart was beating more slowly as if he were sleeping, yet Sagiri knew he was awake.

Silence prevailed, matching Sagiri's restlessness, then suddenly something broke the silence. Well, his silence and he shot up to his feet, startling six runner hares that were almost entering the trap, and they bolted in a blur, blending into the night.

"You finally came."

Chapter 203: THE STRANGER

"You finally came," Sagiri said. His speech was all strange, and his movements were awkward. He was speaking not in korun but wenji. It might have been a broadly spoken language in the West and taught in schools, but it did not mean that Squad 25 spoke it as fluently as he did.

"Who are you talking to?" Kiuga asked the whole team, growing tense, looking for the intruder, but everything remained silent.

The person had indeed come prepared. He must have done his research on Sagiri and knew he could hear a person speak distances away. The person was conveniently 20v away, and he had called Sagiri. Under the sound of night, the chirping of crickets, mating calls of beasts, and the squads around that distance, the voice had stood out to sagiri because it called his lineage.

"Southerner? We finally meet." The person spoke. He did not seem scared at all.

"Who is it?!" Sagiri called into the night.

"I think you know who it is. Besides, we have both been waiting for this moment." The voice answered.

"Why don't you come closer?" Sagiri snarled. He could very much get to where the person was in a second if he wanted to, but the sigil was on now, and perhaps the person was betting on the fact that he could not move while even the mandra watched the test through the watcher's circle.

"Are you betting between my desire to kill you and keeping my secret?" Sagiri said in the Tagayia national tongue. With each word, he took a step forward.

"I could not be that stupid," The Man said. "But your secret lies in my hands now. It is only a matter of time before you have nowhere to stay in Tagayia. You are no longer a student. The ten schools council can't protect you much longer. You will soon meet your end." The man said.

"Let me guess. You are the only one who can offer me a way out. Is this what this is?" Sagiri said the darkness he had tried to hide until this moment became colder. How dare a person who had made his life a joke bargain with him?

"Who is he talking to?" Ulekai shuddered. Of course, no one gave him an answer; they were all looking at Sagiri with puzzled expressions.

"I know I can offer you a way out." The man said, and a small laugh left Sagiri's throat. They put him in the suffocation chamber, sent assassins after him, and made the warriors' guild suspicious of him. He was also sure the death of the Yugo was also a part of their plan to corner him and make the war general himself wary of him. They had purposefully left a trail of blood behind him, and who knew what else they had done to have him cornered. Yet now they wanted to be a solution to the problem they had caused. How very ironic.

They had even used a poison banned in Tagayia to target him, pulling the supreme mandra's attention. They had created a ring of shit around him, and now that things had gone this far, they were offering to help. So that was their plan all along. To corner him, and when he had nowhere to turn, they could swoop in and give him a way out. The question was what the price was.

The laugh Sagiri let out was so cold and chilling. He laughed for a long while before he stopped. By now, he was standing so close to the treeline almost blending into the darkness.

"And what is the price? Or are you helping out of the goodness of your heart?" Sagiri asked. He did not know how the man was hearing him. He must have come with an innovation of his own to help him hear

him that far. He must have also entered the outer nonagon while the watchers' circle was down. It is almost as if it were planned.

"Well, you will find out once you come with me willingly." The man said.

Willingly. Huh. Silence stretched for a long moment. Sagiri stared at the ground for a long time before he looked up into the darkness.

"And what if I refuse. To come with you willingly?"

"Sagiri asked, changing his tone to a condescending one when he said the word willingly.

"I was sure you would say that." There was a long pause for a moment before the man's voice came again, and when it came, it was filled with cold intent. "Aren't you curious to know why your friend is turning pale by the moment?" The voice asked.

"What?!" Sagiri paused, his head swiping around.

"I must say he really is something. He refused to call for help even after I poisoned him with the teardrop poison. He was supposed to call for you, or you were supposed to perceive him going mad for a few minutes with pain, but who knew the boy would jump into a swamp till the madness passed. His type is the worst. He has now ruined my plan A. Good thing I have a plan B." Sagiri could not take what he was hearing.

N'varu was poisoned with the teardrop? The poison, just like its name, is the most painful. One can't stop wailing once they are poisoned with it. As long as it is in your body with every pump of the heart, it would cause agony all over the body. It was mostly used to interrogate people. Its other name is the 'truth sayer'.

It does not kill in the normal sense of all poisons, but most people die in three days from the immense pain it causes. It breaks even the toughest of them. If the pain didn't kill them first, they would kill themselves just to make it stop or beg for death. The fact that N'varu had been persevering in the last three hours without a sound or a tear was remarkable. The first few minutes of pain must have been agony, and the story he had said finally made sense. He had thrown himself into the swamp. To get some relief or hide his presence from Sagiri while the pain ate him alive.

"You are poisoned?!" Sagiri turned, and he was by N'varu's side in a flash.

N'varu was now sweating bullets, and he looked ashened.

"What are you talking about?" Kaka asked.

"It's just the teardrop. The position is not lethal. Their target is you, not me. I can persevere till midnight. Midnight was an hour away or so now, but just hearing him say it made Sagiri so mad.

"Where is the antidote!" Sagiri snarled, turning around with rage. He was asking the man in the shadows, but to this he remained silent.

The poison could kill in three days at most, but that did not mean some did not die sooner, and Sagiri did not want to bet on it. Its antidote was not easy to make either, and it would still take a day to make. Perhaps the sixth wing back in the war headquarters could have them, but that did not mean other places had poison antidotes lying around.

"Sagiri, don't go to him. You know they want you, and you are poisoning yourself. I can wait for the antidote to be made later. Don't give him what he wants." N'varu said, and his voice came out strained as if even opening his mouth was torture.

"Sagiri is poisoned? And you are poisoned? When did this happen?" Kiuga asked in a grave voice.

"Fire the red flare and take N'varu to the healer's wing. I have someone to kill." Sagiri said, standing to his feet.

Chapter 204: THINGS ESCALATE I

"Fire the red flare and take N'varu to the healers' wing. I have someone to kill." Sagiri said, standing to his feet.

"Can someone answer me? What the hell is going on?" Kiuga said, holding onto Sagiri's hand. He was good at strategy, but even he would not plan a strategy without knowing what was happening.

Sagiri snapped back his hand and went to rid himself of all the tags on his upper hand. He slapped them on Kiuga's chest.

"Kiuga, I trust you will get N'varu to the healing wing and the team back safely," Sagiri said in a serious tone. "I'm sure you have always known I am different. Whatever I have to deal with now, none of you can stop it. You can do one last thing for me as a team. Make sure N'varu doesn't die."

There was silence, and no one dared speak.

"What do you mean by the last thing?" Kaka said. It was clear he did not know how to react to the situation.

"Sagiri, please don't go. Let me come with you." N'varu pleaded. He had now let his guard down, and Sagiri could perceive his feelings. The boy was in agony. So much against it was overpowered by the fear he was feeling.

Kiuga had withdrawn the flare, and he was holding it in his right hand, but it was clear he was hesitating to leave.

"Kiuga, you promise now," Sagiri said, and Kiuga finally snapped out of his thoughts and nodded. He knew better than to try to reason with Sagiri when his mind was made up. As the squad leader, he had to think about the lives of everyone in the squad, too. Sagiri grabbed the flare from Kiuga's hand and fired.

"The test is over. Now go!" Sagiri said before he turned around and fell to a crouch. In that moment, he pushed out his senses like wildfire. He was not holding back anymore. Poison be damned. He could move anywhere within the archives' reach now. It all needed but a thought.

Before anyone could move, Sagiri was no longer there in front of them. Where he had been a second before, now there was nothing. Sagiri was in the place where the voice had been talking to him from.

The man was no longer there, however, and he had moved to another direction just as quickly.

"Do you plan to kill me?" The voice was altered now.

"Why don't you stop running, and perhaps you will find out," Sagiri said, rage rolling off him. "How did you even get inside the watcher's eye?" Sagiri had been wondering about that.

"Machines are prone to fail. Don't tell me you are thinking that someone has seen an intruder in this place?" Sagiri remained silent, trying to pinpoint the source of the man's voice. It was as if it was coming from two places now. He had indeed come prepared.

"Have they not?" Sagiri asked, trying to find the real voice. However, he was doing it, which was throwing him off.

"Let me see. That Asakana captain is busy right now with a little treat I left him with in his prison. Well, and your principal is busy watching the exam."

"What did you do to Salka?" Sagiri asked. He was not worried at all about Salka, but it seemed like the man knew well the ins and outs of the academy. Even more, he knew which people were on his side. It was only natural for someone who had him admitted to the number one academy of Tagayia to have eyes everywhere. This was within Sagiri's expectations.

"Don't worry, it will take more than a few hundred prisoners to take out that beast." The voice said what Sagiri already knew. "However, I think he should be the least of your concerns. Haven't you wondered whether your parents made it to the academy or not?" The man said with a small laugh. Sagiri's blood ran cold at the statement. If anyone touched a hair on their head...

He would burn the entire Tagayia to ashes.

"If you touch them..."

"If you come willingly, I would not have to resort to this. Look at what you made me do..."

"... I will kill you." Sagiri continued, not caring what the man had to say.

"Don't be too hasty, southerner. If you kill me, you will never see them." The voice said, and Sagiri trembled with rage. How dare he? How dare he? At that moment, Sagiri found him. He moved to the place within the archives, but again, when he got there, he was already gone. The man was somehow outside the wall now. Sagiri had come so close to the wall without noticing. He pushed the achievement out and moved. His feet touched the outside of the wall, and he broke into a run. He was already hungry throughout the day, and now he had used the archives' teleportation ability thrice in a row.

He did not have the time to catch his breath, however, with his parents' lives at stake. He moved quickly in the direction he thought the man he was searching for had gone. The archive crackled with the killing intent running through his veins. He was a dark blur in the night as he went. He had probably never moved that fast. All he cared about was the desire to destroy. No matter how fast he moved, he had long lost the man, as if he had disappeared completely.

The only direction the person could have gone was to Galka City. Sagiri should have taken a few hours to reach the city, but he was there in less than two hours. The city was mostly asleep. Sagiri passed through the gates in a blur. The wardens there must have heard someone pass by, but by how fast they turned, but he was already gone. He moved from roof to roof, avoiding any place that was still awake. He found the tallest building and perched. Most of the population would be asleep or be at the arena in Galka watching the exam.

Sagiri perched on the tallest roof at the centre of the city and pushed his senses out. Steady hearts met his ears as far as he could reach. Not one panicked heartbeat. He remained there for a few minutes before moving to another, then another. He could not perceive his parents at all. He had been with them his whole life, and he could smell them like a hound. He could perceive them even in a crowd of thousands. After going around the city for a few hours, he was sure they were not there.

Only one thing was left to do. He was exhausted, but he was not going to stop. With that thought, he started his journey back to Galka War Academy.

Chapter 205: THINGS ESCALATE II

By the time Sagiri was breaking through the Galka War Academy's vicinity, it was already morning. Just two hours or less before daybreak. Sagiri had ripped out his sigil at some point during his chase. He had also slowed down a bit. He pushed the archive out on the left side of the wall, a few hundred feet from the gate. He teleported inside the wall and immediately retracted it. The civilians in the arena should have been waking up now. It was a week of no sleep in Tagayia till the exams ended. They slept in sleeping bags in the arena and ate courtesy of the mandra and the great chief of the north. It is considered a festival.

The simple act had finally exhausted him. Even so, sagiri broke into a run at top speed. He needed to find the shortest distance possible to the outsiders' eating encampments. He broke through the woods just as the queue was starting to get fat. The day would start in a few.

The servers gave him strange looks because he was still wearing the Galka Academy combat suit, but they did not question him. Sagiri chose a deserted place and munched on the food without tasting it. It had been a full twenty-four hours since he last ate, and it was all clear by how fast the mountain of food went by.

After drinking a ton of water, Sagiri slipped into the arena and took a seat at the very back. All he had to do now was fall into conscious slumber and wait. He crasped his oru- seals to his ears to shut out the hundreds of conversations happening. He rested his back on the raised platform behind him and let his hands rest on his thighs with his head slightly bowed. The poison had not reacted yet, but he knew something ought to give soon. To make him stand out less, he had ripped out a coat from one of the arena seats and lay it on his shoulders.

One hour tickled by and then another.

Then he heard the awaited commotion. Today was no doubt the second test. The first test always changed over the years, but the second test is always the same. The second test was no doubt the tournaments. All the thousand five hundred cadets will face off against each other and finally get a combat rank. The crowd cared only about the top ten, but even making it into the top hundred was prestigious. sagiri could feel the tension from the tunnels as the cadets marched forward. In the past hour, he had managed to feel a bit rested, but it was barely enough. He could rest after he got what he wanted.

Stillness.

Sagiri remained still even as the gate opened and the cadets poured through. The excitement of the crowd was suffocating. After a few more minutes, he snapped his eyes open. He could taste his own killing intent and somehow, even without knowing why, those close to him felt uneasy around him. Most of the seating platforms surrounding him were left untouched. His right eye looked at the images displayed on the watcher's eye. The images kept changing from one student to another. Right now, it was Kaka, and Wokira was going on and on about something which could only be praises about Kaka. The images changed and changed, and wokira went on and on.

By now, the dignitaries' side of the arena was almost full. The tournament was only minutes away from commencing. Suddenly, the image on the screen changed from one of the Kafika girls, and another face came to the screen. It seemed they were displaying the top images of the top five students of every school in combat and weaponry.

Her!

Her image came into display, and the killing intent coming from Sagiri multiplied tenfold. The archive flowed violently in his veins, answering to his intentions, and even Nokai stirred in the archive pocket. It was time.

Sagiri flew from his place at the back of the arena. With the archive powering him and his killing intent burning like the very sun, he had never felt lighter than a feather. It all happened so fast as the cadets were turning to leave the arena to take their seats so that the first two could begin the tournament. A back blur tore through the air, and even the watchers' eyes missed. Sagiri's eyes were only set on one thing. his target. He found her, and even she did not see him coming.

Sagiri's hand wrapped around her throat and slammed her to the ground, shaking the very arena. Her eyes widened for a bit, trying to fight, but she might have been a match for Sagiri last time when he had not accessed more than half the archives' power, but at the moment, it was like an ant trying to fight an elephant. Something was wrong with her, however. Her strength seemed to increase, too, at that moment.

Sagiri did not give her a chance before he tossed her into the air and followed her to the air. He caught her mid-air again and tossed her to the ground. A small depression formed where she landed, and dust rose. Both attacks had happened in a split second, and no one had ever witnessed such agile violence and strength. There was a pause as even Wokira had his jaw wide open.

The moment soon passed, but sagiri was already holding the girl by the throat to the ground. She must have realised that he had gone berserk at the moment. Even so, Sagiri could not sense fear or killing intent from her. It was as if she were like Kiana, yet she wasn't. That fact irritated him more, and he lifted her by the throat and threw her in the air once again. This time, he didn't follow her and let her fall on her own. Something else had entered his periphery.

The cadets on the field were now running, and the instructors had recovered from their shock, and they drew their weapons. Nokai responded violently, responding to Sagiri's hostility. It tore through the

pocket, and the handle landed on Sagiri's hand. Right as the warrior charged, Sagiri smirked. Anyone who stood in his way was going to be reduced to ashes.

"Nokai!" he called, and the blades snapped out. The cadets and the warriors present all saw it, but they did not stop. Sagiri twisted his body through the air, spinning Nokai violently as he went. The blade did not need to make contact with the warriors because his killing intent and the archives' merging were a deadly combination. The force of their intent hit the hundred warriors and cadets who were close and sent them flying. Some hit into the parricade of the arena. The watcher's circle's eyes caught the action, and the crowd was frozen. They did not know whether to cheer or be scared.

Sagiri landed in a crouch with his right knee to the ground. The sash must have loosened through a couple of series of movements, and it fell loose around his neck. His eyes snapped open, and the red was glowing a deadly red. Gasps tore through the arena as the watcher's eye caught it. He was, after all, the central image being displayed by it.

"Stay down if you don't want to die. If anyone attacks again, I will show no mercy," Sagiri snarled the warning before standing to his feet slowly. He did not want to kill any bystanders, but if they did not stand down, he was to turn them to ashes.

Chapter 206: THINGS ESCALATE

White flares went off, lighting up the morning even further. The cadets were ushered behind the arena barricade quickly as the situation worsened. The situation had grown even more dire with how fast Sagiri was attacking the girl. It was as if he were toying with her. He had wanted to kill her for a long time, but she defended herself with the one swan blade she had. Her attacks were futile to the current killing intent from Sagiri. Sagiri knew that he did not have long before the entirety of the warriors descended on him. It was amazing that the girl had not died already from the assault she had endured. She was strong, there was no doubt about that, but she was still no match for Sagiri with the archive burning through his veins.

After a few assaults and tossing her around like a rag doll, Sagiri finally pinned her down.

"Where are they?" Sagiri asked. The girl just looked at him with a pained expression, but she did not say anything. "Well, I knew you were never going to talk," Sagiri smirked before he smacked his right hand to her head. It could take him at least a few seconds to go through her memories. There was resistance when he started to pry into her memories, but he pushed harder than he should, and they gave way. He did not have the patience to wait.

Finally, as if being swept into her memories, there was darkness before a scream tore through the girl's throat. A scream of agony. She had not screamed that much even when sagiri had tossed her around like a ragdoll, yet now, at him accessing her memories, she was wailing. Just like when sagiri had not been able to access the archive's memory, he felt that the situation was the same with her. Even he might not have been able to access her memories had he grown more powerful.

Sagiri soon found out why the girls were screaming. There was a hell he had never imagined in her memory, and it seemed that she was remembering the hell, too. If he thought what he had seen in the memory of the tamelku twins was horrible, what he was witnessing now was utterly despicable. What in the hell was wrong with the Northerners? Sagiri was only able to go through a few of her memories, but her screams grew even more agonizing, and he pulled his hand back. She was writhing in pain beneath him, and tears were rolling down her face. Even more distinct was the feeling of fear and confusion. The fear was not directed at him but at the chilling memories she must have been remembering, too. But the confusion was blatant.

Confusion?

It was as if the girl under him did not know who she was or why she was trying to kill him. After going through part of her memories, he could understand why. He had not gotten to the part where she was born and who sent her, but he had seen the place where she was trapped in liquid. Getting objected, dissected like a specimen, her samples altered, then injected back into her. It was as if they were trying to change her from a human to something else.

Then came the test where she was beaten up against others like her. The fearful ones whose humanity was still too much were put down. They were killed right in front of the others. Those remaining standing were injected with more fluids and forced to fight each other like beasts. They were being reduced to beasts. The alteration must have been the explanation for unusual strength, even with her small frame. They were then put back into the cylinder tubes, where the process repeated over and over. He had to stop there because he had not expected to see such gore, and her screams were just too agonizing to ignore.

She is just a puppet in her master's hands. That was the only reason sagiri stopped. In the few seconds he had been searching her memory, more warriors and warrior structures had come flooding from all sides, and at the moment, archers were taking positions in the arena.

Whispers were flooding the arena.

"Those eyes. The child of the evil woman who took Taliga."

"Cadet! I am going to advise you to step away from her now!!" a voice tore through the place. The girl was still wailing. Well, it was only normal to wail after remembering such. Even sagiri had wailed when he saw the archived memories of that night. Before sagiri could turn around, an arrow was launched at him, landing deep into his side. The northerners did not really know when to stop. It seemed they had been preparing for a long time to kill him for a long time, even going to the extent of trying to alter kids into emotionless beasts so that they would be able to be used as weapons.

Sagiti grabbed the arrow, pulled it out, and threw it to the side, where it fell with a dull clutter. He was not healing as quickly as he should or at all, and he could only guess it had something to do with the black rot residue still in his system. Even so, he could not forgive such. Not this time. He turned his face to look at the position of the area the arrow had come from, and the man was already pulling back another arrow on the string of his bow, taut, ready to release.

"Kill him," sagiri said, realising Nokai with such force. The sound of blade meeting flesh tore through the arena before the man went tumbling from the high place to the ground, his eyes lifeless. Nokai was now back in sagiri's hand, and it was pulsing with killing intent after a taste of blood.

"Anyone who releases an arrow is going to die," sagiri announced, another warning. There was a pause of silence before five more daring warriors joined the roof and released their arrows. Sagiri smirked as he watched the arrows come at him in slow motion. The archive did not miss any angle of the attack. The arrows brought a memory to the archive of when arrows rained on its holder, and the killing intent surrounding sagiri became colder.

Nokai met the arrows mid-air but did not stop because sagiri gave another command.

"Kill them all!"

Chapter 207: IN A BIND

"Kill them all!!" Sagiri said, and Nokai answered. It always followed its master's call, let alone his instructions.

"Sagiri!! Noo!!" A familiar voice tore through the commotion.

Sagiri turned his head swiftly to look for the source. Somehow, N'varu was standing near the tunnel entry gate wearing the healing wing overall. Lotaga was holding him back from moving. He looked pale from the poison. It seemed he had not been given an antidote yet. Sagiri could also perceive nine more people watching him in awe instead of fear, like everyone running away from the arena or hiding and watching in terror. They must have been the southerners Kiuga was talking about. Sagiri had asked Kiuga, together with them, not to stand in his way and not to do anything reckless. His refusal to meet them and know them was perhaps his way of protecting them. He did not want any southerner to die in the north, even if it was for him.

Sagiri raised his hand, and Nokai paused mid-air. Its silver blades were glowing dangerously with every touch of the sun, making their glare more deadly. He could hear the nine move from all directions to join him in the middle of the arena. He did not need that, and he was grateful Lotaga was holding back N'varu. It seemed Lotaga understood the weight of the situation, and N'varu didn't. If he joined him and the nine with him did the same, then they would be branded enemies too. With a wave of his hand, Nokai moved. Not with a killing intent but with its master's will to protect.

Its glare did not relent, however, as it hit them with the butt of its blade and sent them back behind the crowd of cadets, who did not seem to understand what was happening. N'varu was the last, and he did not leave him out. Lotaga moved to block the attack, but even with the butt of its blade, Nokai's hitting force did not relent. Nokai sent him and N'varu flying back a few yards. He did not hit them hard enough to break bones, but it was enough to keep them down. Even so, he needed to get out of there and find somewhere silent so he could go through the memories of the girl. It did not matter how much main she was in, he needed to know who sent her and where they were so he could find his parents.

Nokai returned to his hand, and its blades snapped back the moment they made contact with Sagiri's hand. It was time to move, or he could not get anything done while hundreds of warriors were still making a move on him.

Even with his wound still bleeding, Sagiri turned his attention back to the girl, who had now stopped screaming and instead she was staring into nothingness with a haunted expression. It was a pity she had to live with a past she did not remember, but Sagiri did not have it in himself to care past her parents' kidnapping. He pushed his senses out and his archive even further, absorbing the terrain's structure with it. He still remembered the cave close to the grave scale's nest, and just as more arrows were launched at him, he pulled the girl into the archive with him, and the next second, they were at the mouth of the cave.

He should not have listened to N'varu not to kill the bastards because after they had been bought a moment of life, they still dared to launch arrows at him.

He had always moved within the archive alone, but he did not imagine pulling another person with him could tire him that much. It was as if his energy had been depleted in half.

"Move," he said to the girl who was still silent. She stood up and walked robotically into the cave ahead. She found a spot and sat down without uttering a word. Her posture was that of defeat and shock. Sagiri stood opposite her and retracted his senses. After a moment or a minute of pin-drop silence, the girl's eyes suddenly focused, and she went berserk again. It was as if she had been reliving her worst memories in silence, and she had finally woken from the bad reality dream. A scream tore through her throat louder than the last Sagiri had heard from her. She started screaming in agony and rolling herself on the ground, clutching her head.

Sagiri could only perceive pain, agony, and confusion from her. The feelings were so thick that they filled the cave with a foul taste of them. Sagiri let her roll around for a few moments before she finally stopped. There was nothing he could have done while she was being tortured by her pain.

"Make it stop. Please make it stop," she crawled to him, holding onto his feet.

"Those are your memories. I can't make them stop," Sagiri said, and the girl flinched but continued begging.

"I don't want to remember. I don't want them..." tears streamed down her face. It was the most expressions Sagiri had ever seen on her. She always wore a robotic expression and moved around like a machine with no emotion. No feelings and nonsense of self. Now that he was looking at her, he could not help but notice how fragile she looked. Her small, round face was riddled with pain, and her eyes were filled with sorrow. She did not look like the girl who had stabbed him twice with no emotion. She now looked like a child who had just gained her consciousness for the first time.

She looked at her hands as if she were seeing them for the first time. There was no doubt she was remembering the things her hands had done. The battles she had fought to the death with the other children in that place.

"What am I?" She suddenly asked. The question was not directed to Sagiri but more to herself. She had sunk back to the haunted calmness yet again. The question was something Sagiri had asked himself for a long time, too. Who was he? Was he himself? Was he the archives holder? Was he the Echo Archives vessel? Perhaps that was a question he might never be able to answer.

"Who sent you to kill me?" Sagiri asked suddenly. He would have loved to sit and play listener and nurturer, but he did not have the time to do that. The girl paused as if she could not understand the question, then, as if the word meant something to her, she reverted to her former self. The emotionless self.

"I have to kill you," she said in a cold tone. After she said those words, she paused for a long moment, her eyes furrowing again, her face softened, and her hands trembled. She looked even more confused at what she had just said, and her breathing became laboured.

"Why do you have to kill me?" Sagiri said, crouching in front of her.

Chapter 208: PINNED DOWN

The girl had fallen silent again at Sagiri's question. It was as if she were trying to remember her reason for having to kill Sagiri, but she could not come up with any, and the more she tried to remember, the more Sagiri could perceive confusion from her.

"Why do I have to kill you?" She said to herself again, more tears flowing down her face. Her usually sharp eyes were red from how much she had been wailing.

"You have to die. You are my target. I must eliminate you," her voice came again, and it was colder than the last. She went to retrieve her blades, but sagiri moved quickly and pinned her to the ground. The moment her back hit the floor of the cave, she froze again, reverting to her normal self. Her brows knitted together, and fear was prominent, oozing from her. Sagiri lifted his hand to place it on her forehead and learn whatever he wanted by himself, but her fear turned into terror, and he could feel her bones quaking. It was clear she did not want to remember anymore.

"P-please, I don't want to remember," her voice quacked. It was as if she had forgotten to fight anymore, and she did not want to fight anymore. Her terror was hard to ignore. She was the reason Sagiri had remembered the painful memories of his clan, and for a moment, he did not want to hold back, whether she begged, but as his hand moved lower and her breathing became laboured, he stooped and withdrew his hand. He still held it in the air, however.

"If you tell me who sent you and why you have to kill me. I will stop," Sagiri said. She breathed a sigh of relief. She shut her eyes in an attempt to remember, but again, Sagiri could feel her confusion. She could not remember who sent her. Her memories were in fragments, even when Sagiri went through them.

Someone must have purposefully messed up with them, and sagiri did not know whether he could see who sent her, even if he gained access to them.

"I don't remember..." she said finally in a small voice, and Sagiri sighed. Perhaps all he had to do was lend her unconscious and go through her memories. Perhaps she could not remember all of it when it got dark. Sagiri raised his hand to smack her unconscious, but she spoke before the blade hand landed on her acupoints.

"I will take you there," she said, breathing rapidly. She must have known what he was planning to do. She was the number one cadet in Yalami in both combat, weaponry, and bookwork, and even though her memories and body were altered in a lab to make her stronger and smarter, it was still impressive.

"Take me where?" sagiri asked. Withdrawing his hand back entirely this time. He stripped her blades from her and clasped them to his straps before he pulled back and off of her. "If you try to kill me again, I will not hesitate to go through your memories and then kill you," sagiri warned before he put distance between them. She nodded slightly before she sat up. She was still trembling, but another look had taken over. Determination.

"I know where I was before I went to the exam council that day," she said, and sagiri could remember that day. That was, after all, the first day they had met, even if it was in passing.

"Is the one who sent you there?" sagiri asked, and the girl tried to remember, but obviously couldn't.

"I guess," she said, and Sagiri sighed. What a bother. He could just go through her memories, but her taking him to the place was still a good deal. Now the only question was how they were supposed to get out of that place with the outer pentagon terrain crawling with hundreds of warriors. He had been pushing out his senses in intervals, and in the past few minutes, they had been holed up in the cave. The place had gone up in flames. Warriors, warrior instructors, and even cadets must have been sent out to look for him. The cadets must have been the group at the far back following the elite warriors.

Even with his abilities, it would still be a pain to get out of Galka Academy without having to kill his way out. Not that he cared much, but that would only waste his time, and if a group made contact and fired a flare, then it would turn into a suicide mission for both sides. The wound on his side had healed halfway, but the black rot residue was a pain, too. Even just a residue of the damned poison couldn't allow him to heal any quicker. He could teleport out of the walls with the girl, but he had spent more than half his strength in just one move, and if he used it again, it would be suicide. They would make it outside the wall, then what? Then he might just collapse, and the girl could kill him and run. She might

have agreed to work with him, but it was only because she was scared of him and terrified of remembering.

Sagiri clutched the wound on his side, which had not stopped bleeding. He had lost a lot of blood, too, and the odds stacked against him were beginning to stack even higher. He sank to a sitting position and pulled the sash hanging on his neck. He knew it could not offer much help in stopping the blood, but it's not like he had that many choices. Now that he was bleeding and could not teleport within the archive, his chances of being caught were even higher. Poisoned, wounded, energy depleted, and a girl with him. The odds were not looking good at all.

"Here," the girl suddenly said, and in her hand she was clutching her sash. Sagiri looked at her skeptically before he snatched the sash from her hand and joined it with his. With warrior hunters like Lotaga and many from the west inside the terrain, he was basically pinned. Many were prone to let their beast free to search, and blood was the most attractive thing to any hunting beast.

"How did you make me remember?" the girl suddenly asked. She was now looking at Sagiri weirdly. Sagiri ignored her and continued to tie the sashes twice around his torso.

"How are we going to get out of here?" the girl asked after a long moment of silence, and sagiri still kept quiet. This time, he was not keeping the answer to himself, but he did not have the answer to the question. The only option he had was killing his way out, and at the moment, he did not know the probability of it working or how long he was going to be able to hold on until the blackrot residue pushed back.

He did not know how they were going to get out.

Chapter 209: STRANGE REALIZATION

"How fast can you move in the woods?" Sagiri asked after a long moment of him patching his wound. If only it could heal any quicker. It looked like it could take another two hours for the wound to heal completely. If he waited two more hours, however, the window to escape the place could get thinner and thinner.

"I am the fastest in my school," the girl answered.

"Good, we will make a run for it. If you slow me down, I will just make you remember." Sagiri said, and he meant it. He could just go through her memories, but they were too fragmented, and he did not think his benefactor could be in them.

Suddenly, a weird sensation went through Sagiri. It was as if he were losing control for a mere second, but regained it quickly. He remembered N'varu once saying that if he let the one inside him take control, he could become a puppet. His eyes turned black, then quickly returned to normal. Sagiri staggered and sat down with a thud. His eyes kept going from black to normal. The girl looked at him curiously as he went through the phases. That had never happened. Sagiri could feel his body begin to burn, perhaps from the poison or the current state he was in. He could not know for sure.

Sagiri groaned and panted, clutching his throat.

Now of all times? Now was when the freaking poison residue and the archive chose to overreact. He panted even harder, trying as much as possible to let the pain pass, but it seemed to increase and get unbearable by the second. He wanted to scream in pain, but even the slightest noise could call for the trained hunting beasts. The pain was so severe he could hear himself scream on the inside, and sweat accumulated quickly on his brow. Suddenly, a hand touched him on his face. His eyes snapped open in alarm, only to find the girl kneeling in front of him. She was looking at him curiously with a tilted head. He did not trust her yet, after all, she had almost killed him. However, before he could throw her off him, the place she had touched on his face suddenly cooled down. It was as if the energy within her was the opposite of the one inside of him.

She must have touched his face unknowingly or on instinct, but she suddenly realised what she had done, and she withdrew her hand immediately. At that moment, they made contact without her intent to kill him, and Sagiri felt something from her. Whatever he had felt could not be. He refused to voice it out. It must have been his tired body playing tricks on him. The archive had never lied to him before, but for the first time, he doubted it.

It was impossible.

The pain rushed back into Sagiri's body once again, and without thinking, this time he grabbed both her hands and put them on his face. She gasped in surprise but stayed still. There it was again, the feeling. It was now deeper than the first time she had laid his hand on him. She must have felt it too, by the way her eyes widened, matching those of Sagiri. Their eyes connected, and their emotions flew around them. For the first time, Sagiri was left speechless, and he could not believe or imagine what he was feeling to be true.

His skin and insides were cooling faster the longer her hands stayed on his face. The markings inside of him stirred violently this time, and they did not call her an enemy. They called her a different name.

What was happening? This was impossible.

The girl had always been meant to kill him. Even long before she was taken into that damned lab to be turned into her beast. She was always meant to kill him. Only she wasn't meant to kill him out of enmity. Perhaps that is why, among those altered in a lab, only she was a success. She was always meant to heal him or kill him. Sagiri finally pushed her back when the searing pain inside of him faded.

"Who are you?" Sagiri asked. She looked even more shaken this time than the first time she had witnessed her memories of that lab place. She looked even more confused at what had just happened.

"I-I don't know how I did that," she stuttered. She must have done it without thinking. That was the only explanation. At that moment, Sagiri understood something new. There was something he did not yet know about the archive and his origin. There was something else he did not know, something that whatever he had remembered did not explain. He had a feeling that his going south was the only way he was going to find the answers he was looking for. Right at the moment, however, he needed to get away from the walls of Galka. The wound on his side was still healing slowly. That had not changed at all.

"What clan and tribe are you from?" Sagiri asked again.

"I didn't know," she answered honestly. Of course, she couldn't know. She was raised in a tube.

"We need to move," sagiri said finally. He was not going to get any answer from the girl; he knew that. She was in the dark about this, just like he was in the dark about it. The girl nodded and moved beside him. "You follow me and don't try anything stupid. Remember, you tried to kill me first, and my grand marshal knows. If you try to scream or something, you will suffer the same fate as me. If I don't kill you first," Sagiri repeated. His feelings were now conflicted, but his stand on killing her if she tried anything stupid had not changed.

The two walked slowly to the mouth of the cave. Sagiri could not feel any presence nearby yet. They could not be sure he was within the walls of Galka, but they were going to comb every inch of Galka Academy before they started chasing after him outside the walls. It was quiet, but the woods were restless. The number of warriors in them in the past few days had greatly affected the peaceful existence of the beast across the terrain.

Right when sagiri and the girl took a step out of the cave, suddenly a huge figure landed in front of them, stopping them in their tracks. Salka? A big cat landed beside him at the same time and was standing beside him. Its jaws hung open, showcasing its sharp canines. Sagiri had always known the man was something, but finding him that first was something he had not expected. It was not in his plan to fight Captain Salka. Perhaps it had always been prone to happen, but he had not expected it to be when he was planning to escape.

"Are you here to kill me?" Sagiri asked, his muscles tense. Salka was standing still, his expression unreadable, with both hands resting on his chest. A quiver full of arrows was resting on his shoulder, together with the bow. A moment of silence passed before Salka finally parted his lips to speak.

"I told you that if you ever harmed a student of Galka Academy, I would kill you." His tone was cold and rigid when he said those words.

Chapter 210: UNEXPECTED TURN OF EVENTS

"I told you that if you ever harmed a student of Galka Academy, I would kill you." His tone was cold and rigid when he said those words. Silence prevailed after his statement. Fighting with Captain Salka as his first opponent on his escape was the worst possible match-up.

"I only want to get out of here. I don't plan on coming back," Sagiri said. He was still reluctant about fighting with Salka. He was not an easy opponent. The fight would not be silent, and it would call every warrior hunting to him in the place. The fight could not do him any good or increase his chances of escape in the slightest. Even so, if it demanded it, then he would have to fight Salka. The big cat circled Salka before it came to a stop beside him again, and its eyes rested on Sagiri, watching his every move intently. It must have been the one who found him. Just how lethal were the cats trained by Salka?

"You even went as far as injuring your friend and my comrade. How do you plan on settling that score before leaving?" Salka said in the same cold tone as always. He was really not giving anything away. Salka has always been protective of Lotaga. He was like a grown son of his.

"We can fight another time. I will settle the score after I find my parents," Sagiri said. He just hoped that he could understand the urgency of the matter.

"Your parents?" Salka asked, tilting his head and his eyebrows furrowed.

"Yes. The person who poisoned N'varu and sent this girl to assassinate me has them. He wanted me to go with him willingly if I wanted to see them again, but I could not. I have to find him and kill him, then I

will find you, and we will settle this score," Sagiri said, and the furrow on Captain Salka's face grew deeper.

"Salka doesn't scare the boy that much. You know you don't want to kill him, or you would have already, since you have been lurking for the past few minutes." Another voice suddenly joined the party as Senraki tore through the woods, swinging on his hooked rope and landing beside Salka. Salka did not even turn around to acknowledge Senraki.

"What do you mean the man took your parents. They encountered robbers on the way who stole their carriage and horses, but they should be in Galka City now on their way here," Salka said, and Sagiri paused in shock.

What?

"It could seem this time you have fallen headfirst into your benefactor's trap," Senraki said, what Sagiri already knew.

"Are you sure my parents are safe?" Sagiri asked.

"I personally asked Seyika to bring them from the hideout. He might look scrawny, but he is one of the deadliest warriors Tagayia has ever hatched. Yes, some thieves stole their carriage and horses while they were eating at an inn, slowing their journey down, but the messenger bird Seyika sent me this morning told me he would be arriving with them in the academy in a few hours," Salka said, and Sagiri did not know whether to be relieved or mad.

"So your friend being poisoned was his plan to sell his second plan. He is indeed smart. After poisoning your friend, you were sure to go mad. Anything he said after that could have had you baited," Senraki said, and Sagiri had never felt so stupid. He had not even gone to check in with Salka to know. The man had also not left that detail out, and he had talked about leaving Salka a gift, and Senraki could be busy. He had led him by the rope and pulled his strings like a zither, and he had just gone along and danced to the rhythm.

"I now understand why you went mad. Even Salka could do the same if I got poisoned." Senraki added after a while.

"Shut up!" Salka said.

"He said he left Captain Salka a gift in the dungeons, and the Grand Marshal won't come to my aid because you would be busy watching the game," Sagiri said more to himself. The deal the man had sold him had left no loopholes, and it had no opening at all. He should have known that it was a bluff. Only bluffs are that perfect.

"So he is the reason my three dungeons were unlocked?" Salka said as if he did not care much. "I should thank him because my cats managed to get fuller than usual." Of course, Salka could say something like that. Galka War Academy was his turf, and whatever that man had said should have sounded impossible to Sagiri. However, him poisoning N'varu had sold every other word he said. His plan was for him to lose control, it seemed. He had greatly underestimated the man.

"Don't beat yourself up. Even the best of us could have fallen for that trap," Senraki said. "You have, however, dug a grave not even I can get you out of. The only redeeming quality is that you have not killed the girl. So now you have one less enemy," Senraki said. That was also true. After killing the warrior who shot an arrow at him, Sagiri was no doubt now an enemy of the warrior's guild. He was already an enemy of the war headquarters, and if he killed the girl, then the ten schools could join the party.

"Care to tell me why you haven't killed the girl?" Senraki suddenly asked, and the girl flinched.

"She is to take me to their hideout. At least the one she remembers. I was supposed to look for my parents from there," Sagiri said, but now it sounded stupid because it seemed the benefactor, or that man in red, if he was the one, was far more cunning and his plan was far more elaborate. This time, he had fallen headfirst into his web, and there was no telling if any move he made was not just digging his grave even deeper.

"It could have been better if you had killed her. How stupid can you be to follow your enemy into their hideout? What if it is part of their plan?" Salka asked, shaking his head.

"Hey, Salka, you don't teach a man to swim when he is drowning," Senraki said to Salka before he turned to Sagiri. "What is done is done, your parents will keep being safe in my and Salka's care. Killing a warrior in broad daylight, those eyes, and that weapon. The list is long. Things are not looking good. There is no easy way out of this," Senraki said.

"I will go with him," the girl suddenly said. After the feeling they shared after they made contact, her attitude had changed. It was as if she was finally waking up from whatever thing had been holding her like a beast.

"I don't know what has happened between you two while you were holed up in that cave, but that is stupid, young lady," Senraki said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"These are kids. Behave your age," Salka groaned. Sagiri did not understand what Salka was scolding him for, but he did not ask.

"Now, as I was saying, there is no way out. There is no reason to doubt in everyone's mind that you are from the south. The South is a sore topic not dared to be spoken of in the North. Your display right now puts a nail in that coffin," Senraki said, and Sagiri already understood that. His benefactor had made sure to corner him, and it was an immaculate success on his side. "However, fear can also work to your advantage now. Rules always change for the strong," Senraki said, and Salka sighed.

"What kind of advice is that?" Salka voiced his disbelief.

"What do I do?" sagiri asked, eager to understand what Senraki wanted him to do so he could change his now tight position. This had already gone south, and perhaps his benefactor was indeed counting on him being cornered. Perhaps instead of taking a step back. Things needed to get from bad to worse.