

KEEPER 241

Chapter 241: HIS SQUAD

Tonight would be the third meeting since the first meeting. The second had been a one-sided meeting, and this one, well, it wasn't a meeting because Sagiri was waiting for the team. After they left the college successfully on their own, it's when Tsaka could pull some strings to make sure it was as if they never left and to tie up any loose ends and make their disappearance seamless.

Sagiri had not managed to stay at the war college for long during the second night, but he had left a written letter with cues for Kiuga to find it. It was much harder to meet the others the second time since they were having some compulsory night training. He had clearly said in his letter that he wanted a squad, but they had to be willing. Even if only Kiuga and N'varu showed up, he would still be grateful. Sagiri perched on the abandoned watch tower a couple of thousand miles away from college. That is where he was to meet with Kiuga and whoever showed up. The watchtower must once have been the first to welcome anyone who came through the southern gate, but now it stood abandoned and alone.

The night was silent, and it was now midnight, but not even a leaf had fallen. The night was still. Perhaps matching Sagiri's anticipation. Sagiri had not slept or eaten well in the last three days, and a single nightmare was still driving him crazy whenever he closed his eyes. He had grown weary of waiting as rain started falling a few minutes after midnight, and he was not leaning on one post of the tower. It might have been abandoned, but it was still able to keep standing and cover him from the rain.

Was no one coming? Had they failed to make it out?

But then again, if one was incapable of evading the warriors on watch and breaking out of the college by themselves, then they were not worthy of joining his squad or standing a chance against Tatani.

He was beginning to doze off right after one when he felt the first presence a few thousand yards out. The person was moving soundlessly and as stealthily as possible. He stayed hidden, watching the tower from the shadows before he finally made an appearance. By his movements, it had to be Kiuga. He stood at the bottom of the tower for a moment as if to make Sagiri aware of his presence before moving back into the shadows. A few moments later, another presence arrived. Of course, Kaka Asakana. It was right to say that he and Kiuga were sworn brothers now, and if one was willing to go, the other could naturally follow.

His arrival was silent, but Sagiri could smell the guy's excitement and impatience. Kiuga stopped him, and they both melted into the shadows.

N'varu was the third to arrive, then Bukata and Zazarie, Ulekai the fearful was the sixth, followed by Maita and Banga. Zolinka was the last to arrive, and they were all hidden in the shadows. Sagiri could feel their eyes on him or just the dark tower.

His face could not help but pull into a small smile. He had not thought Ulekai and Banga especially could show up. Even Zolinka was quite a surprise. Maita's arrival was expected, however. He was not going to let Kaka one-up him on merits. A chimera would never let an asakana outdo them. Squad 25 had grown strong together in Galka, and it seemed they were able to find a way to make it out of the college without getting caught. Sagiri's heart swelled with nostalgia. Even so, a bitter-sweet taste filled his mouth.

This could be, no doubt, the last mission he was going to execute with his squad. This could very much be the last time they stood on the same side. Just how many goodbyes could he afford before he gave in to the nightmare that he could not escape from? He had not faced most of his squad ever since he went berserk, but he could not delay any further. He could feel Kaka's impatience growing, and he knew it was time to make an appearance.

Sagiri walked to the edge of the thirty-foot watchtower and let his feet walk over the edge. He had gotten used to free-falling, and he enjoyed it now more than anticipating touching the ground. In those moments before he touched the ground, he was free. He closed his eyes and let himself feel the wind and last of the rain wash over him as the ground rushed to meet him. Ooh, to be free. Free from his sealed fate. Right when he was ten feet away from the ground, he twisted his body one to look down, then twisted twice more to magnify the short-lived freedom before he flipped and twisted his body through the air to land on his right foot and bent left knee before he stood his full height.

He did not leave a single dent on the ground this time.

"Show off," a voice joined a few moments later. It was Maita.

"Long time no see," Sagiri greeted as more shadows emerged from their hideout. It almost felt like old times.

"A greeting is not going to cut it." Zazarie snapped. It could seem he was not happy, the same with Bukata.

"Kiuga said you were about to commit suicide, and we should come to bid you farewell. I almost thought that fall was you taking your easy way out." Ulekai was beside himself.

What?!

"I said, he was going on a suicide mission, and it would be nice to say proper goodbyes," Kiuga defended. He must have lied to them to get them all to come.

"Tomato potato," Maita said.

"A tomato and a potato are not the same thing." Banga corrected him in a low tone. "So what have we gotten ourselves into?" Banga turned to Sagiri.

"We can't talk here. I will tell you once we are out of the Tagayia collegium lands," Sagiri said after a moment.

"I know you were not planning to leave without us," a voice joined the group, causing the group to turn swiftly, getting into a defensive position of two out of habit.

"It's the triplets again." Kiuga sighed.

"I thought this was a squad thing. Why are they here?" Kaka grew hostile.

"Well, we can't let squad 25 of Galka Academy get all the glory," Nayira said. Sagiri turned to look at Kiuga. He was the only one who knew about the squad meeting point, and he was to relay the message to only squad 25.

"I swear on my good looks, I did not tell them," Kiuga swore.

"What looks?" Kaka groaned, raising his hand to smack Kiuga but Kiuga dodged.

"You do underestimate my beast and Pavire's bird." Gavina said. The girls looked like they had come prepared and were even carrying war-equipped backpacks. It seemed the girls were not going to back down, and Sagiri did not have it in him to argue with them. He was only asked to get his own willing

team. He did not will it for the trio to come, but asking them to go back would be the same as talking to the deaf.

"See. I am innocent in this," Kiuga defended. A little commotion had ensued, and if it continued, they would be caught before they even made a step.

"Let's just go for now," Sagiri said.

They had a lot to do. And there was no time to bicker.

Chapter 242: MISSION BEGINS

From the Tagayia Collegium to the outer city of Alika was not a long way, and they were at the planned meeting before the early hours of the morning. Once Sagiri and his squad gathered, the other squad could meet them. True to the matter, as if someone had been watching the place waiting for their arrival. Less than half an hour later, the other squad gathered. Tsaka was not with them, but Sagiri and the captain of the squad had already gone through the skeleton of the plan.

Once the two squads gathered, there was a clear distinction in rank and skill. Even with their faces covered, they still looked intimidating.

Squad Sagiri now contained thirteen members, and the other squad, thirty elite warriors. Sagiri could not help but think that they were members of the shadow corps. The thirty members of the elite squad were under Captain Yoka. Perhaps his being from the Anki clan was the major reason he was put at the head of the mission. The role of the Yoka squad was only to offer support if needed and to pull out the warrior cadets if necessary. It would be tragic for warrior cadets to die on a secret mission. Sagiri had a feeling that the other reason they were there was to kill him if he strayed from the plan, but there was no need for that.

"Is this all the team you gathered, Thirteen warrior cadets?" Yoka asked as soon as they were all gathered.

"Yes."

"Who is the strategist you talked about?" Yoka moved to the centre of the circle. Sagiri turned to look for Kiuga, but Kiuga had already stepped forward.

"That would be me," Kiuga said, smiling ear to ear. Squad Yoka did not look impressed at all. Yoka turned around to size Kiuga up, and Kiuga was so kind as to give him a 360-degree view that could have earned him a beating from Kaka, but the environment was so tense that Sagiri could feel the intimidation rolling off his team. It would be difficult not to be intimidated by the yoka squad. Sagiri had explained a bit about them on the way, parts of the mission, and what had happened. Part of it.

"The southerner refused to trust our strategist. I hope I don't have to come to your rescue before you even touch Tatani." Yoka said. It didn't sound like mockery but a warning. "What have you come up with?"

"Well, I can't really say I have come up with anything," Kiuga started resting his hand under his chin. He was the only one still smiling in the tense environment.

"I can't believe the general agreed to this," Yoka cursed.

"The information I have of Tatani is just too meager. I plan to gather more information about them and understand their terrain, power structure, and approximate manpower and level of hostility before I can make a plan." Kiuga said. His logic was sane enough. Kiuga was not one to make a plan when he did not yet have facts.

"So your plan is to come up with a plan in the future?" This time, it was Yoka's vice captain who spoke. Tavora, who spoke. They were a brutal bunch.

"If the southerner has not told you this, I will. My squad will not in any way interfere with the mission but only offer support when necessary. That being said, I am not willing to bet my team on any undercooked plan..." he paused for a moment, and his eyes looked around at nothing in particular as if he was listening to something.

"Didn't you say that your team is made up of thirteen members?" Yoka made a hand signal, and there was a rushed movement before there was silence.

"Yes. I only brought twelve," Sagiri said. He knew what Yoka was asking him about, but he had been too tired to care about the addition.

"Then who is this wearing the college combat suit? A spy?" Yoka said right as two of his squad, who had disappeared, came back dragging someone. "Aren't your senses supposed to be the sharpest?" his tone was thick with warning again.

"I know she has been following us since before we left the Tagayia collegium," Sagiri answered as the circle split and a way formed for Lira to be dragged forward and be dumped at the centre.

"And you didn't stop her? Why?" Tavora asked.

"She is not my priority. She can follow me all she wants. She is not in my squad." Sagiri said, looking at the girl who had not stopped looking at him since she was brought in. She did not look guilty in the slightest. Just what part of him telling her 'no' did she not understand?

"We can not have someone following us. I will have her sent back to the war college." Yoka said with slight irritation this time. It was clear he was not pleased with the level of incompetence ever since they rendezvoused.

"I don't want to go back. I want to go with you," she said, looking straight at sagiri and sagiri was beginning to regret not killing her.

"And I already said no." Sagiri was at the end of the rope. He simply did not have time to go back and forth.

"She has already heard of the mission anyway. We can't afford for anyone not on this team to know about our whereabouts." Tavora said. "Let her come with us. You two can solve your love squabbles when the mission is done."

Sagiri wanted to correct him, but he was more irritated that Lira was now on his squad. She was like a weed that could not be dug out, and that was choking him.

"If you do anything that goes against this mission, I will kill you myself," Sagiri warned instead. He meant every word. If she was on the mission to sabotage it and cause anything to go wrong, he was not going to stand for it.

"Yes." She nodded vigorously. Was she even right in the head? Did she not even understand the lines between friendship and amenity?

"Now that that is out of the way. You warlings can't go out looking like this. It will draw too much attention." Yoka said.

Losing the uniforms and wearing regular outfits was the next step of the plan, and carrying regular bags. They would not move in one group, and they were broken into smaller groups by Yoka to avoid drawing attention. Just his luck, Sagiri was stuck with Lira while everyone else was broken into teams of three. They will have to move through the central plains until we are far south enough, then go west. Avoiding as much contact as possible with the West was the best option so far.

The central plains council did not wish him dead, and so they would not be looking for him. They would regroup and rest when they got to the Anki tribe. Moving on foot would take them at least a week. The teams, even separated, were still just a few thousand feet apart from each other, the most. It would take Squad Yoka less than a week, but since they were basically watching the mission, they had to cut their pace.

"We move out!!" Yoka gave the command just as daylight broke.

Chapter 243 FINDING PIECES TO SOLVE THE PUZZLE

"So, you are saying that we need to break into Tatani to collect intel?" Yoka raised his voice an octave.

"Yes, this is the only way," Kiuga answered.

"You also know that no one has entered Tatani and come back alive. Do you not?" Yoka asked.

It was now the tenth day since the squad left Alike City and three days since they set foot in the Anki tribe. The tribe was the one to suffer most losses from the Tatani. Being hunters and nomads, the Anki owns lands upon lands, but the scar left by Tatani was too deep, and the chunk of land claimed by them was massive. Yoka knew the Anki terrain best and had led them through it through the uninhabited lands. They were now sitting a couple of hundred vaara from the Tatani lands. It was the first night.

Nothing was really unique about Tatani from where they sat. No one lived in those parts, but they did not dare take a step closer.

"I know. This is like asking me to solve a puzzle with missing pieces of information. We have to enter Tatani at some point anyway. We can't defeat them from here." Kiuga defended.

"I know, I am just reminding you of the fact," Yoka said, raising his eyebrows.

"What should we do?" Sagiri asked.

"We go in, well, not to the heart of Tatani, but we have to find out what makes them so deadly. We need to know what traps they have set. To cross a river, we must test the depth of the water." Kiuga explained

"What is your plan then?" Tavora asked.

"We set three bases. One here, one northward, and one to the south. Each base will have ten members of Squad Yoka. Five will remain far out, and five will touch the Tatani border but will not enter. You can change the watch, but the bases will remain the same for now. That cuts how far you are supposed to go, doesn't it?" Kiuga asked. He was sitting on the ground, and a proper map had been provided for him. Of course, the map included the former Anki tribe's land terrain before they were taken away by Tatani.

"Yes," Yoka said. The two squads were deep in the leafy and thick forest before Tatani.

"Our Sagiri squad will be divided into three as well. The triplets are all good at hunting and have tracking beasts..."

"I was the best in my school in sensory stimulation exercises. I can help." Lira spoke for the first time in days. Sagiri had not spoken to her on the way, and they had just traveled in silence. He might have let her come by Tavora's word, but it did not mean he had accepted her.

"I don't know what happened between you two while you were gone, but you tried to kill Sagiri once. You are part of the reason we are in this twist. It doesn't matter if you feel guilty now. You are not part

of this team as far as I know." N'varu bit back at her hard. Lira flinched as everyone's attention fell on her.

"You tried to kill a man I have challenged?" Gavina stepped forward, going for Lira's throat. The two stood nose to nose. They are about the same height, but with Gavina's habit of walking with her nose raised, she seemed a bit taller.

"I- I..." Lira tried to speak, but Oka hissed, matching her master's mood.

"I dare you to fight me. This can only be solved in a fight." Gavina stepped even closer till the two were standing chest to chest.

"Fighting here will give away our position," Ulekai said, looking around with fear in his eyes, but the ladies did not look like they heard him. The Yoka squad did not even make a move to stop them. They were neutral to the small argument.

"If only I had women fighting over me." Kiuga broke the tension, wiping a fake tear. "But you ladies need to put your claws away, you will fight when this is done, and the winner can marry our Sagiri."

"I dare you to repeat that." Gavina snarled, and Kiuga lifted his hands in surrender.

"Calm down, Tsanka girl, or are you afraid to lose to her?" Kiuga egged her own, and her eyes flashed red.

"A man arguing with women. How disgraceful." Kaka said, still sitting a bit to the back of the small clearing. He had been sitting in a meditative state since they started making a plan. He claimed he wanted to calm his spirit before the mission.

"I might put you on the ladies' team if you keep talking." Kiuga taunted back, and Kaka snapped his eyes open.

"You should have died at birth, but it's not too late to kill you." Kaka pulled out his blades.

"Fine, fine, I take back my statement," Kiuga lifted his hands in surrender. "So much for calming your spirit," he said, the last part more silently. His mouth could get him killed one day. Hopefully, he had a strategy for that.

The yoka squad now knew that they had two of the sitting grandzoraths' descendants on the team. Gavina might not have been Nakai's blood, but she was strong and just as cold as her. Nakai's daughter was now just joining the war college, and Gavina stood at a closer position to take after her aunt in chiefdom. Well, if Nakai's daughter wasn't colder than her. For the tsanka tribe, the colder the better. Kaka is the son of Zaka Asakana, and the Yoka squad's hostility had gone down a notch.

"As I was saying," Kiuga started again, getting back to seriousness. Bukata and Zazarie had silently stood between the two ladies' factions, and things had cooled down. "The triplets will take the southern side together with Bukata and Zazarie. You move slowly and find traps set in your way. For tonight, we will move in for only two hours, then pull out and report to the five at the edge. Mark the routes you create so that tomorrow we move quickly and cover new ground. The north will include Lira, she had said she is good at sensory. Maita, banga, ulekai, and zolinka, you will be on this squad.

"The centre team will be me, N'varu, Kaka, and of course Sagiri. The central part is the most dangerous and more treacherous bit we have, Sagiri. Sagiri is the best in sensory, and so we will tackle the centre. We move in a triangle formation. You move inward from the south, and you move inward from the north," Kiuga said, pointing at the two teams. "Where we meet at the centre is where we will see our new base, only this time we will have three ways to escape created by us. You must mark the paths well. Remember to move as slowly as possible. I suppose there are many traps, and dying on a scouting mission is just too embarrassing." Kiuga insisted on making light of it, but everyone could tell just how grave the situation was.

The Sagiri squad was now dressed in old civilian clothes, and they looked nothing like warriors. More like youths who were where they were not supposed to be. The Yoka squad could not go into Tatani, and so they were still dressed in their dark combat suits that covered their faces and hands, leaving no skin untouched except the eyes. Just how obvious were they willing to make it that they were the shadow corp?

"When do we move out?" Sagiri asked.

"When night falls," Kiuga said, standing to his feet.

"Won't it be easier to go in during the day if there are traps?" Sagiri asked. He did not have a problem moving and seeing at night, but won't walking at night increases the difficulty levels.

"Remember, they also see better during the day. We might have it harder at night, but so will they. They are human after all, and we all, even though trained, have a bit of difficulty seeing in the dark." Kiuga said. "This puzzle won't be easy, but every puzzle has a solution and a pivot point; we just haven't found it," Kiuga said.

"I see," Sagiri nodded.

"Not that bad. But some puzzles have several pivot points," Tovar said. He is also the strategist of the Yoka squad. Even he understood they needed more pieces for the puzzle to be solved.

Chapter 244: INTO TATANI

By nightfall, the three teams had separated, and a base had been set in the south, north, and middle. They would go in two hours after sundown, and at the moment, Sagiri, Kiuga, N'varu, and Kaka were lying down a few feet away from five members of squad Yoka who would remain at the border of Tatani. Their task was to wait for them to come out after two hours, and if not, then they would go in to pull them out. When the two hours after sundown hit, the four rose from their hideout. Silence was key, and sagiri had been listening in on the direction they would be going.

It was deadly silent. It brought back memories of when they had gone in to eliminate the tree snakes up north. They had managed to scare away all the small beasts.

"Anything?" Kiuga asked, shuffling closer so Sagiri could hear him. It was not necessary anyway because with the silence, Sagiri could hear him from a mile away even if he whispered.

"Nothing, not even a squirrel," Sagiri said.

"That's odd. How can there be no beasts in such a tranquil place?" Kaka said.

"Very odd. What do we do?" N'varu whispered.

"We go with the plan," Kiuga answered, and the team started preparing to enter the Tatani lands. There was fear and anticipation in the air. This was squad 25's first real mission together, and it just had to be in the deadliest territory.

Taking a step into Tatani felt odd, and everyone was involuntarily holding their breath. Two steps in, then a hundred feet. Sagiri could not feel anything yet. Things were getting more odd. The squad held the formation with Sagiri in the lead. Kiuga and at the back, and Kaka and N'varu flanking him. He was the strategist after all, and they had to protect him most. If he were taken down first, Sagiri would have to depend on Tavora, and he did not want to work with any strategist besides Kiuga.

The team moved slowly, depending on Sagiri's eye, mostly to look out for traps. There were no traps.

Just land that looked like no one had walked through in years. The silence was thick. It was unnerving. Even the wind seemed to have stopped as soon as they stepped into the Tatani lands. The silence pressed harder the deeper they went, settling into their bones. Like the land itself was holding its breath.

A faint shift passed through the air. It was as if just stepping into Tatani, they had completely stepped into a different world. Each step felt heavier and more eerie than the last. The fear in the air was not just coming from inside of them. Perhaps during the decades of war between Tagayia and Safaya, the land had taken on a new smell. It only knew fear for ages, and maybe it had become fear itself.

"Is it me, or is this chilling?" N'varu said after a while of walking. He was not one to be easily startled, and voicing his worries made everyone more on edge.

"How long have we been walking?" Kiuga asked after a while. Sagiri lifted his watch to his eyes. He was the only one who could see the outline of the watch with his right eye in the dark. His brows narrowed the moment he looked at the watch on his wrist. It had stopped at the two-hour mark after dark before they entered Tatani.

"My watch seems to have malfunctioned," Sagiri said, coming to an abrupt stop.

"What? Here, use mine." N'varu said.

Sagiri turned around and grabbed N'varu's lifted wrist to look at his watch, but just like him, N'varu's watch had stopped at the two-hour mark after dark.

"This is odd," Sagiri muttered.

"What is it?" Kaka asked.

"Both our watches are malfunctioning," Sagiri said, already crossing over to look at Kaka's watch. It was down just like his and N'varus. He moved quickly and snatched Kiuga's hand before he gasped. Kiuga's watch was also down.

"What is happening?" Sagiri asked no one in particular. "Why are all our watches down?" At his question, he could feel the uneasiness rolling off his teammates.

"What do you mean all our watches are down?" Kaka asked with a beat of irritation as if he was blaming him for his dead watch.

"We need to pull out. Now!" Kiuga said, and the team started retreating. This is why Sagiri liked working with Kiuga. He did not hesitate to make important decisions, and if he did not understand something, then he would not take any chances. The squad started pulling back immediately. The squad broke into a run following the path they had used to go in. Sagiri had it all memorized with the archive. It only took them twenty minutes, if running at top speed, to break out into the starting line, which is to show they had not gone so far into tatani. The five members of the Yoka squad, involving captain yoka himself, were in tense positions outside the Tatani territory.

"What took you so long. You were supposed to be in there for only two hours, both to and from. It is three hours now, and I was about to come in," Yoka said in an irritable voice.

"What do you mean by three hours? We haven't been in there for more than an hour or so," Kiuga said, and Yoka's eyes narrowed.

"What are you talking about? Don't you have your watches with you?" Yoka asked.

"All our watches stopped the moment we stepped into Tatani territory," Sagiri said, and the four with Yoka looked at them as if they had grown another head.

"What do you mean, all your watches malfunctioned?" Yoka said, looking at his watch. It was surprising that he could see his watch in the dark. Well, Sagiri could expect nothing from the shadow corp. The four with him lifted their hands in uniform.

"Mine is working perfectly fine, and it's almost midnight," one of the Yoka squad said, and the others nodded in agreement.

Sagiri lifted his hand to look at his watch, and it was now working properly.

"What is happening?" Sagiri gasped.

"Are you sure the southerner didn't lie about it just to scare all of you?" Yoka said in an accusatory tone.

"My eyes don't miss any detail," Sagiri snapped, his glowing eye falling on Yoka.

"Sagiri can not possibly lie about something like that. I believe him. We need to pull back to the central base. And take a headcount now. Something is not right with this land." Kiuga said with urgency. It was clear that Squad Yoka was not buying it, but they could not do anything about it, and so they could just nod, and the team started moving back to base.

Chapter 245: BACK TO SQUARE ONE

"Oka was too scared to go any further, and we pulled back. We did not have to look at our watches." Gavina said.

"We were going in circles. I noticed that after we were back at the starting point twice, so we pulled back," Lira said.

"And our watches malfunctioned," Kiuga said.

It was now two hours after midnight, and the three teams had gathered at the central base. It seemed something bizarre had happened to each team, and they had no choice but to pull out.

"All your stories don't make sense," Tavora said. "A people like the Tatani tribe could have such intricate traps set out? I don't believe it," he argued.

"Could it be hypnosis?" Zazarie asked, and everyone paused.

"If it were, we could perhaps all be dead. This wasn't it. We were there in real time, but it seems something far worse than hypnosis is at play," Kiuga said.

"What could be worse than hypnosis?" Sagiri voiced his thoughts. Hypnosis was the worst secret art he had seen. It could not work on him anyway, but just imagining being stuck in a time space or being put to sleep by your enemy gave him chills. He could have all the time in the world to carve you out and cut you to pieces.

This, however, was nothing like it. They were completely conscious but ended up seeing things anyway. Sagiri was still a bit scared to merge with the archive this time, and he had suppressed most of its power and stuck to using only his right eye. Even so, he had still felt the markings on his body crawling, but ignored them. He did not want the scene that had happened when he blacked out to repeat itself. Especially now, when those he was with were people he did not wish to kill. That 'him' did not distinguish between friend and foe and just cleared everything that breathed in his path. He had seen it and witnessed all of it in the archive memories. He did not regret wiping out the seventh wing squad, but it could be such a tragedy if he took out his friends this time.

"There are far worse secret arts out there. Some were banned by the state, and the tribes that practiced them were wiped out," Yoka said, and Sagiri's blood boiled and his heart twisted painfully. So this was Tagayia's way of dealing with the strong. If the secret art is too strong, then they wipe them out.

"Typical Tagayia," Sagiri sneered in disgust.

"You can sneer all you want, but you yourself just felt the weight of whatever this is. Better to do away with a future enemy than live scared for the day they could turn from friend to foe.

"It just sounds like an excuse to me. Excuses made by the weak to make themselves feel better for being born weak," Sagiri said, and not backing down.

"Keeper, let it go, for now," N'varu said beside Sagiri. Sagiri glared at Yoka for a moment longer before he looked away.

"What do we do now?" he said to Kiuga, who looked lost, deep in thought.

"Whatever is at play here, we need to break it before we even think about moving forward," Kiuga said, and everyone nodded in agreement.

"I say we go in during the day this time. Whether it's hypnosis or whatever you say, most of these are easy to avoid if you can see the caster and avoid them," Tovara said. Sagiri looked at Kiuga, and he still looked to be thinking for a while before he turned to Tovara.

"I agree, but we have to come up with a new plan this time," Kiuga said. They were typically now back to square one.

"I think whatever it is seems to have affected those with high sensitivity to their surroundings. Oka was scared to move as Gavina said. The girl was able to find out that they were going in circles, and the only reason the middle team did not go any deeper is that Sagiri was able to see the watches had stopped." Banga spoke for the first time. His voice was low and steady as usual. He barely spoke, but whenever he spoke, it was something he was sure of.

Kiuga jumped to his feet and started pacing at banga's words. They made the most sense.

"So whatever lies ahead is like a double-mouthed snake. Those with high sensitivity to their surroundings, like Sagiri and the snake, as well as Lira, were affected the most, but they can notice when their surroundings are wrong. All squads did not walk deeper in because of them, so it means those of us without sharper senses could not have realized something was wrong till it was too late," Kiuga said, pacing up and down.

"So, for us with less sharp senses, we could have just kept going and walked into a bigger trap?" Ulekai shuddered.

"Perhaps," Kiuga said, "but even though Sagiri, Oka, and Lira were able to realize something was wrong and blow the whistle on going further in, perhaps further in they both could have been affected, and we could all have ended up being stuck in this loop, not knowing what the time was," Kiuga said.

"No wonder no one goes in and comes out," Yoka said. He had finally believed Sagiri's words after the other two teams reported about their encounters.

"So, using our senses will be our downfall, you mean?" Tavora said. "The way I see it, we have to lose all our senses and, especially, our sight."

"And why is that?" Kaka asked, obviously not liking the idea of being blindfolded in enemy territory.

"The way I see it is that all of you were seeing illusions. The southerner can see too much, and perhaps that was his downfall. All of you must have been illusions. You didn't see any traps because perhaps you were already in one. It is good that you pulled out before you fell into another trap," Tavora said.

"Illusion!" Kiuga said, pausing. "So this is what that was. I have never heard of secret art that uses illusions."

"So there is indeed something worse than hypnosis," Zazarie said.

"I am not sure yet. I am saying that whatever everyone saw, including the terrain, might have been false.

"No wonder no one comes out when they go in," Banga echoed Yoka's words. "We might have been lucky this time, or perhaps this was a warning not to go any further."

"I perhaps should go in alone," Sagiri said after a while.

"No."

"Absolutely not!" Yoka and N'varu answered at the same time.

"Do any of you have a better idea?" Sagiri huffed. He did not need babysitting anymore, and the way he saw it, only he could move without the use of most of his senses and fight if it came down to it.

Chapter 246: ILLUSION

After coming up with a new plan, the teams moved back to the Tatani border. This time, they would wait till daybreak. They would not be separating; instead, all of them would be going through the middle. separating when in a time like this would definitely be their downfall. Kiuga had drawn a new plan. This time, they would move in as one, with Sagiri leading and Gavina and Lira flanking him. They would go in during the day and make sure not to lose the three leading at any time.

If they failed to break the illusion's trap this time, then Sagiri could go in alone for the third time. If everyone was going to be in danger anyway, then it was better to wait for him to go in by himself this time to pave the way for them. Captain Yoka, Tavora, his vice captain, and thirteen others had joined in on this second expedition. Tavora was to help Kiuga come up with a new plan if things changed while they were on the inside.

Yoka also said that there was a formation of his squad that could break illusions. They had, however, never tried it before since they had never encountered it before. The shadow squad was through all ways to break all secret arts, if not counter them. People tasked with protecting the supreme mandra could, after all, not go out there while lacking any skill.

At the moment, they were on the outside of the Sagiri squad formation. Their formation, if needed, could only protect the ones inside the formation. Sagiri had encountered one of their formations. The shadow whirlpool and he had almost died back then if Salka had not forcefully broken it and gotten him out of there. Perhaps they could be able to break the illusions if it came to that. If they even managed to tell that they were in one.

"Only an hour before daybreak, I should tell you about an illusion trap first," Yoka said in a low voice, and everyone turned to him.

"Captain, this is top secret information. They are not even fully fledged warriors yet," one of the Yoka squad said.

"I know. But they need to know how deadly illusion formations are, at least," he said with a sigh before continuing. The tribe that practiced illusion as a secret art went extinct a few decades ago. "And no, Tagayia did not have a hand in wiping them out," he said, this statement looking straight at Sagiri.

"As if I can trust your word," Sagiri said under his breath.

"What happened to them then?" Kiuga asked. Yoka had been reluctant to tell them this information, but it seems he had changed his mind on letting them go into enemy territory half-baked.

"The Selaya clan of the Tavurni tribe, who practiced this art, wiped themselves out. It is said that the most talented of them was wronged by the chief of Tarvuni. He wanted to marry her when she already had a lover, and it is said he killed her lover just to get her. She expected her clan to be on her side, but at this time, only her four friends stood by her, including the sister of her dead lover. The four ladies

then joined hands and put the whole tribe under an illusion. In the illusion, they made it so that what they defected looked like sweet food..."

"Stop, I am going to throw up." Ulekai was wretched at the last line and started retching over.

"Shut up. If you are so scared, go back to war college." Kaka shot Ulekai a glare. Ulekai shuddered before he ducked behind Kiuga.

"You warlings seem to have encountered hypnosis, but at least for hypnosis, one can wake you up, or you can snap out of it, depending on your mental strength. Or at least you can die a painless death while you are stuck in a non-existent memory. However, illusion is far different and far worse. Firstly, you will not see this trap coming, and you might never know. The Selaya clan, even though practicing the art, did not stand a chance against their strongest caster, and they did not even notice themselves dying from eating their own waste. By the time the state noticed, the massacre had already happened. Only the chief remained, and he was stuck in the worst illusion yet. He had already lived the nightmare for three months, and even when rescued, his mind was already too tortured. He killed himself soon after because he could no longer tell illusion from reality. He couldn't eat because he couldn't trust the food in front of him.

"You were lucky to notice something was wrong. Perhaps because the casters are still far into the terrain. The strength of the illusion increases with the number of casters weaving it, and the closer you get. The further in we go, the more dangerous it will become. And the worst part is that with an illusion, you notice nothing is wrong. You can stab your friend, thinking it's your enemy.

"The ground remains solid. The air feels normal. Sound behaves the way it should. That is the first layer of the illusion. a perfect imitation of normal. Nothing changes because everything has already been replaced, and your eyes can not see the real from the fake.

"The illusion forms a closed field. Not just visual alone. It bends sound, distance, direction, and timing. What you see aligns with what you hear. What you hear aligns with what you expect. It not only creates false images, but it also rewrites the space so your senses agree with the lie. You walk forward and cover ground, but not in a straight line. The terrain subtly shifts under perception. Landmarks reposition by inches, then by meters, until direction loses meaning. You believe you are advancing, but you are being turned.

Time doesn't exist in an illusion, as you realized. Clocks stop. Shadows hold position. Repetition begins, small at first. The same ridge appears twice. The same sound echoes at the wrong interval. You dismiss it

once. Then it happens again. When the mind tries to fix what feels off, the illusion becomes even more real. It adjusts faster than your thoughts. The more you focus, the more consistent the lie becomes. Eventually, your senses stop questioning it, and you are contained in the illusion. By then, you can not escape. Even if no one kills you, you will die of starvation or by eating soil, thinking it's bread. Harsh weather can feel like a warm blanket. not to forget this place harbours fear, anger, and resentment over the many years of war. You need to put away all your emotions because you will most likely fall for what is eating you on the inside." Yoka finished and looked at Ulekai, Kaka, Kaka, then Sagiri.

A moment of silence passed as everyone absorbed the news. Fear was now written on everyone's faces. It was only natural since no one wanted there to be a possibility of them eating their waste. Even Sagiri had the hairs at the back of his neck stand to attention. He was not scared of the eating your waste part, but the stabbing your friend part.

"So you mean I might not only drink my own piss, but Kaka can call me dad, thinking I'm chief Zaka," Kiuga said, masking his own fear. It was clear he was trying to lift everyone's mood, but he had used the worst example, and Kaka's eyes flashed red.

"Has your neck grown tired of your head?!" Kaka gritted, taking a menacing step towards Kiuga.

Chapter 247: SCARS OF WAR

Just as the sun broke out, Sagiri gave the okay, and Sagiri got ready to spearhead the squads into their possible death. They crossed into the old warlands without breaking formation. The shift felt almost immediate when they set foot into the Tatani lands. Sagiri led from the front, his pace steady, the squad moving behind him in clean intervals. No one dared to speak.

The path they had created the previous night was already gone. Sagiri was sure his previous night team noticed it, and there were intakes of sharp breaths.

"The path we took last night seems to have changed," Sagiri said. Those behind him grew even more tense. No one answered him. Perhaps they had taken a different path, and the illusion made it look straight. Once Sagiri, Oka, and Lira felt anything odd, the team could then cover their eyes and depend on their other senses to move.

The ground bore the memory of war. Long scars cut through the earth where trenches had once been carved, now softened by time, edges rounded, half-swallowed by grass. Patches of dark soil lay scattered between stretches of green, places where nothing had fully returned. They walked past the remains of old fortifications. low mad walls collapsed into uneven stone, their purpose long gone.

Rusted fragments of metal lay half-buried, dulled by years, no longer weapons, just remnants. The air around carried no tension.

Trees had grown where lines had once been drawn. Thin at first, then thicker deeper in, their roots breaking through hardened ground, forcing life back into places that had rejected it for years. Some leaned at odd angles, causing the terrain to look more devastating.

Sagiri's eyes moved across everything as he walked. Reading the land. He needed to believe that what he was seeing and whatever the archive was recording this time was true and not an illusion, yet. The formation held tight behind him. They moved like they were still on a battlefield, even though the war had left this place long ago.

A broken structure stood ahead, barely standing, its frame split and hollow. Vines had claimed it, pulling it inward, it could have been a house or houses, but now it just lay in ruin. The sight so far was just sad, and it was hard for sagiri not to remember his clan. Yoka had warned against having strong feelings in this place, but it just hit close to home and could not be helped. Sagiri adjusted his pace slightly, guiding the formation forward without looking back. He could bear to see the scars of war again and again, yet more lay waiting. The place was just a child of war in itself. The war had ended here, but it had not disappeared. It had sunk into the ground, into the air, into the shape of everything around them.

The squads moved in unison, and no one had deterred just yet. Even Oka was still silent, resting on Gavina's neck. Pavire had let his bird fly above, waiting for her call if she were to fall into distress. The bird was selfish and only loyal to her. Well, weren't all beasts the same? If it came for him, then they would all be saved anyway. The squads had relaxed a bit.

Soon, the grass thinned. The ground hardened in patches, then softened again. The trees grew closer, their trunks uneven, roots pushing up through the soil like old fractures that had never healed. N'varu shifted slightly behind him, then stilled again. They were so silent that sagiri had to check several times to see if they were there. They moved like that for a long stretch. Then the trees broke suddenly, and a clearing came into view. Sagiri stopped at the edge. The ground ahead opened wide into a clearing too large to be natural and too ordered to be random.

Rows!

Endless rows stretched ahead. Markers stood across the field, uneven in height, shape, and age. Some were carved from stone, worn down until the markings were almost gone. Others were nothing more than rough slabs driven into the ground. Many leaned over, and some had fallen. A few were split clean through.

A graveyard?

A graveyard

A massive old graveyard sat right in front of them. It stretched farther than the eye could see, fading into the distance. There was no clear boundary. Just a field of the dead lay. Had Tagayia and Safaya caused all this? Sagiri felt even more resentment and anger. Right now, he was feeling all the emotions Yoka had spoken against. Sagiri stepped forward into it. The ground changed underfoot. It grew softer under, but everything inside of him hardened.

The squads had come to stand beside him. There were mixed feelings in the air as they watched the mass graveyard. What a dishonourable way to die and be buried just like an animal. The squad followed behind sagiri, slower now. Eyes moved across the markers, reading what little remained. The names worn away, symbols broken, dates lost to time. There were too many. Not from one battle. The graves span from decades old to a decade old. Some graves were marked in clusters, packed close together, uneven, rushed; they carried the evidence of how rushed they had been buried. Others stood alone, spaced apart as if placed with care. A few had been reclaimed by the land entirely, their markers swallowed, leaving only slight depressions in the ground.

No recent disturbance. They had no one to visit. Only aging in silence. The air felt heavier. Sagiri's gaze moved across the field, steady, calculating, but quieter now. Had his clan been buried the same way? Were there even bodies left to bury after the fire? Did anyone visit them to pour them a drop of water to quench their thirst as they lay in wait for him? His anger, sadness, and pain grew.

"We should keep moving," Yoka said. He was leading the left-hand formation while Tavora led the right. sagiri had completely stood still, lost in his own memories, but when Yoka took a step to walk over the graveyard, he swirled around too fast, and his anger and sadness-filled eyes froze Yoka in place.

"Don't step any further!!" Sagiri growled. He could not help but imagine that someone was at the moment walking over the graves of his loved ones.

Everyone froze in place. His voice had carried so much emotion that the ground shook and the archive stirred in warning.

"This is not the time or place. We have to cut across, so get to the other side sooner." Yoka said after a moment, going to take another step.

"I said, don't go any further!!" Sagiri warned again, and the air cackled with tension.

"Sagiri, what is it?" Kiuga rushed to his side. Sagiri did not answer but sank into a crouch and laid his hands on the first grave lying in front of him.

"I will visit soon and bring a cup of water," Sagiri said silently. He was making a promise to his clan.

"Southerner, this is not the time to feel nostalgic. We have a mission to complete." Tavora said. He sighed with boredom and went to take a step into the mass graveyard. Even worse, his right foot was dangling over an old grave. How disrespectful. he was more so a Tagayian, and stepping on a grave his kind caused was just too disrespectful.

"I said DONT!!" Sagiri snapped, standing to his feet. An invisible force hit Tavora square in the chest and sent him flying. He flew a few feet through the air but managed to land, catch himself, and control his fall. It was almost futile even as he twisted his body to land properly because he still managed to land carelessly and fell to one knee, hunched forward, and spat blood. But Sagiri was not done.

Tavora needed to die.

"NOKAI!! Sagiri called, and his blades tore through the archive pocket.

"Sagiri No!!"

Chapter 248: TRAPPED I

"NOKAI!! Sagiri called, and his blades tore through the archive pocket.

"Sagiri No!!"

Nokai tore through the air, and time slowed as everyone watched the blades emerge and tear through the air. Most of the Yoka squad had not seen the blade in action, and they had barely any time to react. N'varu's voice reached sagiri's ears in both warning and panic. Reluctantly, the blade stopped a breath away from Tavora's throat for a long, tense second while Tavora looked at the sharp edge with fear. It

was too late to defend against Nokai, and he knew that. The blades snapped into the ground in front of him, disappearing a few inches into the soft ground as if pinning him in place and preventing him from going any further.

After a second of the blades pulsing dangerously in the ground before Tavora. Sagiri swung his hand back, which was shaking with his need to finish off Tavora. He knew very much this was not his clan's graveyard, but at the moment, he was still not going to allow anyone to walk over the graveyard. Stepping on someone's grave after all could guarantee death in some tribes. It is a form of disrespect to the dead. Nokai unearthed itself from the ground and cut through the air as it returned to its master's hands. Sagiri folded his hand around its handle and swung it around before he held it threateningly, ready to release it again if need be.

Nokai did not sheath its blades as its master still very much emanated with killing intent.

"Keeper, put away the blades. We can't fight here," N'varu said, but he was very much giving Tavora a distasteful glare. N'varu was right. If he killed Tavora, then a battle between them would ensue, and it would not need an enemy to wipe both squads out.

The Yoka squad had taken defensive positions now, and they had formed a protective barrier in front of Tavora, who was still coughing blood.

Yoka was still standing between the two factions that had suddenly formed. Sagiri's squad had instinctively taken positions beside him.

"Southerner, sheath your blades," Yoka said after a long pause.

"Perhaps you northerners have an inch to die by my blades. Stepping over the dead who died by your blades? How disrespectful. If anyone takes a step into the graves, I will not stop, my blades this time. I will also not sheath my blades until they do," Sagiri said, still trembling with rage. Yoka looked between sagiri and his squad for a long moment before he spoke again.

"Sheath your blades!" he gave the order to his team. They seemed reluctant for a second, but sheathed their blades and loosened their defensive positions.

"Now it's your turn, Sagiri," Kiuga said after a moment. A barren moment passed before Nokai snapped back, and it disappeared into the archive pocket.

"We go around the graves," Yoka said after a moment with a heavy sigh. Tavora finally managed to stand on his feet and limped to join the group. He looked like he wanted to say something, but sagiri's icy glare was still on him, and he just narrowed his eyes before joining the back

even with the visible hostility in the air between the squads. The squads fell back into formation. The only difference this time was that Tavora was at the back of the outer left wing. Silence prevailed once again as the two squads began their journey around the graves before they could proceed inwards. The graves stretched even further around. Just when they all started thinking there would be no end to it, suddenly a wide bath gave way. It seemed like the path was made between graves for people to pass through. It was wide enough for five people to walk side by side. Even so, no one dared to walk into the path until Sagiri stepped onto it.

Everyone could still feel his anger. It was clear to see in his movements. He was agitated ever since his small exchange with Tavora. a few feet into the path, and Oka suddenly hissed. The snake became so restless, and they all stopped instantly. The archive stirred violently, the markings on sagiri's body crawled rapidly. They were all writing the same message to him.

Danger

"Now!" Sagiri said with agency. Everyone had long known the time had come, and they reached for the makeshift blindfolds they had made. sagiri clasped his seals on and tied his red sash from Galka on top of his eyes. He still had it with him since he did not stay till the end of the exams.

There was shuffling for a moment before everything stilled.

"No matter what you hear, if I haven't stopped. Don't stop," Sagiri said. He could now only perceive the presence of the squads. They could keep a tight-knit group and make sure not to lose him. Sagiri began moving again, and the squads could now depend on their senses to follow him partly. They walked for a bit longer, and Sagiri was sure they were now at the edge of the graves.

Oka had been agitated all the while, and Sagiri could perceive the beast's agitation the deeper they went. Suddenly, however, the beast stilled, and it was as if Sagiri lost its presence completely. In that split second, he could not perceive anyone anymore, as if they had suddenly disappeared.

What?

There was no way he could lose everyone's presence in a flash. That was impossible. Could he have already been stuck in an illusion? Sagiri reached for his blindfold and pulled, and just as the blindfold came off, Sagiri felt the ground under him shift, and he was falling. The ground beneath him remained the same; however, the feeling of falling was deep. The ground under his feet might not have changed, but the world around him... wasn't the same in a flash.

The graves were gone. The silence remained, but it was different now. The feeling of familiarity crept into him, and the silence before the storm. He knew this silence very well. His body stiffened. The smell hit him next. The smell of smoke, ashes, and burnt earth

Sagiri didn't move. He didn't need to turn. He already knew where he was. The village stood ahead. The village he did not wish to return to.

Or what was left of it.

Structures broken, some still smoldering, others collapsed into themselves. The ground was blackened in wide patches, the air thick and heavy, carrying the remnants of the tragedy that had befallen it.

His breath slowed.

"...no."

Chapter 249: TRAPPED II

"...no," The word came out low. He knew where he stood at the moment. It was no doubt an illusion, and he knew that. All he had to do was break it and return to reality. Just how did the illusion know to bring him to his worst memory?

Perhaps that was the cruelty of an illusion trap. If one had the strongest sensitivity to their surroundings, they would recognize the shift in reality. Even worse if one had strong emotions regarding a certain moment in their life, whether happy or sad, then the illusion could just use it and did not need to create a new illusion.

The first to reach his ears was laughter. It was close and in the silence that had been holding the place down. Sagiri turned swiftly to look where the laughter was coming from. They stood there. Northern warriors armed with bows and arrows. His mother was kneeling to the side with three arrows launched into her torso, and she was now laughing at him, too?

What twisted illusion was this?

One of the faceless northerners tilted his head slightly, studying him as if nothing about this moment was unusual.

"Well," he said, almost amused, "look who made it back." he laughed. He was faceless, but Sagiri had never felt a bigger urge to kill someone. Another laughed, louder this time.

"Thought you'd be dead with the rest of them. So there still lives a N'folu." Sagiri didn't answer, but his body trembled with rage.

"Make it stop!!" he could not bear to see the faceless northerners laughing at him or the odd laugh in the face of his dying mother. His eyes moved past them to the ground.

Bodies. Familiar faces he had seen in the archive memory. They hadn't been arranged. They still lay dead in fatal positions on the sand, their life sipping into the soil. Somewhere they fell. Others dragged. The scene wasn't chaos anymore; it was an aftermath.

And they were laughing at him. At all of it.

"You see it now, don't you?" one of them said, stepping forward slightly. "What happens when you're not strong enough?" his body was mutilated, and half his face was gone. Another voice, sharper.

"You ran and left us for death." This one was a woman whose clearly pregnant belly had been torn in half, and a baby was hanging from it.

"I didn't run! I was a child!" Sagiri defended. It was as if his own clan was not blaming him for being alive. Sagiri's gaze snapped back to them.

"I didn't run..." he repeated in a broken voice. His voice was low. But it trembled at the edges. sagiri had asked himself the same question over and over. Why did it have to be him who survived? Why him?

They laughed again.

"Yet you haven't come back after sixteen years. " How unfilial," another sneered, laughing.

"You weren't there," one of them replied. "Same thing." Something inside him tightened. "Yet now you are in the company of those who killed us, and you plan to protect some of their kin."

The laughter didn't stop. It grew and got layered. Not only the faceless northern warriors, but also his mother and all his dead clan. More voices joined, some he didn't even remember, all of them carrying the same tone, dismissive, amused, certain.

"I am only doing this to get back to you!" Sagiri said, sinking to his knees while he clutched his head in his hands.

"Do you think this changes anything?" One of them said, raising his weapon lazily. "You're still too late."

"stoop! Get away from me!" Sagiri screamed in agony. He could not see his clan this way. They were peaceful people who had died to protect the echo archive. He was going to kill whoever created this illusion.

"Still angry," one of them said, stepping over the fallen body like it meant nothing. "Good. Makes this easier." They moved all at once, pointing fingers, blaming him, and mocking.

"Stop!!" Sagiri yelled, but the illusion did not break

"Nokai!" Sagiri called, and his weapon tore through the archive and fell into his hands.

"They are not real! They are not real!" he chanted, but it seemed like the more he tried to resist the illusions, the more real they got. He swung Nokai around, but it seemed to cut air. Of course, they were not real. He knew they were not real, yet these had been real members of his clan.

"Are you planning to kill us, too? Have you been corrupted by your clan so much that you want to kill us?" They laughed and mocked him even more. sagiri could not take it anymore. The anger inside of him and the agony grew to levels he could not take. This needed to end either forcefully or in another way. The markings on sagiri's body crawled violently and accumulated like rings of energy on his wrists, hands, and feet.

Sagiri shot through the air, going as high as he could. He twisted his body through the air to add as much momentum to his fall when he finally reached the peak of his ascent. The archive cackled with his descent, so much so that the air froze and its particles tore to just let him through.

For a suspended instance, Sagiri hung above the ground before landing on all fours. His fists and feet were fully charged with the archive. There was a pause even in the illusion before everything disappeared. Sagiri had never used this much force before, even when he flattened the small village south of the Haku tribe. this time in the most agony, and whoever had pushed him into the illusion could feel his anger.

The impact split the earth outward in four violent lines, cracks racing from each limb like jagged veins as the ground buckled and tore under the weight of the charged descent. Everything around him shook as it got swept away by the impact, swept away and flattened. Trees were uprooted from the roots, and some split into thousands of pieces. The impact went on for thousands of feet, clearing everything in its wake before it finally stopped.

The illusion broke, and Sagiri finally snapped his eyes open.

He, in a moment, had flattened masses of land, and even the graves had sunk, and were nowhere to be seen.

Even with this, Sagiri was still angry.

His anger could burn until he found whoever cast such a cruel illusion. Perhaps it had been his fault for being too agitated and falling for it, but that was still no excuse.

Where is everyone?

Chapter 250: UNFORGIVABLE

The illusions broke, and Sagiri fell forward, panting, trying to catch his breath. He stood in the newly formed depression. It was as if the escalation and his snapping had finally let go of the feelings that had been holding him down. All he felt now was a strange calmness and ice enveloping his heart. The illusion weavers had caught him under their web because of the agitation he was experiencing at the mass graves, the anger he felt for his clan, and the sadness. The illusion was by far the most treacherous secret art he had ever seen. The energies of the place must have been the reason it was stronger. The place was already riddled with agitation, anger, and sadness, and he had fallen into it headfirst.

That won't happen again.

Now, where was everyone? That was the only question he had been asking himself. The place around was now deadly silent. There was no heartbeat for hundreds of vaara. Had he killed the two squads and buried them under the debris in his madness and forceful breaking of the illusion?

sagiri listened again for a long moment, and still nothing. His heart froze even deeper. If he had killed everyone, then what was the point? Suddenly, however, the archive stirred with additional weight, and Sagiri suddenly realized there was an addition in his archive. Just then, he remembered that he could move within the archive, and he could also hide it like when he hid from the fourth wing captain, Loku. The same place he had myama's offspring hidden.

Sagiri was glad he had killed them.

The archive must hide them from his rampage, answering to his fear of not wanting to hurt them. Even so, Sagiri knew the place was not meant for anything living, and they had been in their place long enough. If they stayed any longer, they would die if they weren't already.

"Pull them out!" he screamed as his wish to eject them merged with the archive, and in a second, the squads tumbled out of thin air. They all looked shocked, their eyes wide with fear. There were sharp intakes of breath as they breathed rapidly to take in as much air as possible. Coughing followed, and panting before everyone finally started to take in their surroundings.

"What was that?" Kaka was agitated as usual. Everyone got into defensive positions, looking for an invisible enemy.

"I was so scared. I could breathe. I thought I was going to die." Ulekai wailed, still clutching his throat as if he couldn't believe he was able to breathe again. His fear was valid, and even Sagiri could still remember the burning of his lungs when he was hiding from Captain Loku. They did not know what it was and where they were and whether it was an illusion, and Ulekai's fear was valid this time. Even Kaka did not scold him about acting unmanly this time.

"Don't tell me we are all under an illusion. What is this place?" Kiuga said, looking at all the damage that lay around them.

"It is not an illusion. I broke it." Sagiri spoke, and everyone turned to him as if noticing him for the first time.

"Wait! Are you really back? Then where are we and what happened here?" Ulekai said frantically that he was still fully panicked. The Yoka squad was extremely silent, taking in the damage around them.

"This is not an illusion." Vice Captain Tavora said.

"Perhaps this is the first time we are not under an illusion since we entered this place," Yoka said, taking a deep breath.

"I broke the illusion forcefully," Sagiri said, turning to face the squads who were still gathering themselves after being almost suffocated to death.

"You did this?" one of the squad yoka asked, the shock and fear heavy in his voice.

There was silence as everyone took in the damage even more clearly.

"How are we not dead?" Ulekai's eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

"Because he protected us," N'varu said with pride. At N'varu's words, everyone gasped.

"Protected us? He almost killed us wherever that was he put us." Kaka said angrily, "Let me tell you, Sagiri, if you go on a rampage again and put me somewhere I can't breathe for that long, I will kill you."

Everyone could understand where Kaka was coming from, but they had to agree. If they remained in the archive pocket for much longer, they would have died. Even so, Sagiri could not help but find amusement in Kaka's reaction. It was almost too predictable. Perhaps it was a good thing to know that everything out of the normal irritated him and made him angry.

"Would you rather have been buried and flattened like the trees and graves?" Kiuga sighed.

"Well, he was the one who lost his mind. We could not have needed protection from his own madness in the first place." Kaka said, still pouting.

"I don't plan to put you in there again. Well, unless I have to," Sagiri said. He turned his head to look at squad Tavora on the last part.

"hypocrisy. You refuse us to walk over the graves, yet you flatten all of them now." Tavora said under his breath, but he did not voice it out loud. Perhaps even he did not wish to go back in there.

Now that the shock on everyone was wearing off, Sagiri was beginning to realise that he was yet to see some faces and hear some voices.

"Where are the ladies?" Sagiri asked, and everyone grew silent.

"Can someone answer me?!" Sagiri's voice rose an octave.

"Well, a lot happened while you were stuck in your own madness for an hour, and a lot happened in that time. To put it shortly, your friends were taken by the tatani while we were all trying to protect you while you were stuck in your illusion." Yoka said his voice was steady.

An hour? He had been stuck in that illusion for an hour. Why did it feel like it had been a few minutes?

"I hear that only women manage to master high levels of illusion for some reason. Perhaps Tatani took them to teach them the art, which is highly unlikely because they are from Tagayia. Their tribal tattoos will give them away soon, even with the disguise..." Tavora started saying.

"To kill them?" Sagiri asked.

"If they wanted to kill them, they could have done it here. Why take them away? Perhaps they just want to..." Tavora stopped himself and sighed.

"What?" Kiuga asked with urgency.

"Breed them... to have girl offspring for them before they kill them." Tavora finished, and the place fell into uncomfortable silence.

"How disgusting!" Kaka sneered. Bedding a woman without her consent? How dishonourable." Kaka was beside himself.

"It might be the case. I am not sure, but why else could they take the women and leave us?" Tavora added, and more tension filled the place.

Sagiri could not believe his ears.

He had planned to use diplomacy on the Tatani, but now his mind had changed. He was going to flatten them. Either submit to his wishes or die. They were going to die under Safaya or Tagayia one day if they didn't move somewhere else. If they defiled the honour of the women they had taken, then they were less than beasts. It didn't matter if they were a tribe of war orphans, that was just something unforgivable.