

Chapter 281 BONI VALLEY II

Sagiri slowed as the land ahead began to change. The desert flattened into long stretches of dark stone and dead earth, and far in the distance, the horizon appeared broken as if the world itself had split open. From where he stood, Boni did not look like a valley. It looked like an enormous wound carved into the land. Towering black cliffs rose around it in jagged walls that stretched so far outward they disappeared into haze, their surfaces uneven and scarred as though something ancient had torn through them long ago.

Even from that distance, the scale felt wrong. The cliffs dwarfed everything around them, casting massive shadows across the surrounding terrain. Nothing moved near it. No birds crossed above it. No sound carried from within.

Sagiri could not feel any sign of life yet. Perhaps they were buried so deep in the loins of the valley.

He needed to find the opening. Well, there was only one way in and out of Boni Valley, and it wasn't that hard to find. The place's rocky peaks were cold and covered with mist and darkness, however. not that it could slow him down. Sagiri jumped down from where he stood and began moving closer and closer to the valley.

The closer and closer he got, the more enormous it got. Time to find the single opening into the noreturn valley. Sagiri circled the place, moving at top speed until he saw a dark opening curved from darkness itself. The closer the eye drifted toward the opening, the darker it seemed to become, swallowing light instead of reflecting it. He could still not perceive the twenty-two who could be trapped well and those trapping them. Just how deep into the valley were they?

Sagiri slowed down into a walk, moving from wall to wall of the opening until he burst clear of the entryway.

Beyond those walls, only fragments could be seen. Uneven forests, collapsed structures buried beneath overgrowth, deep stretches of fogged darkness where the valley floor dropped out of sight entirely. The entire place looked abandoned by the world itself, silent in a way that felt unnatural. The walls of black stone rose so high on either side that they almost erased the sky above him. The deeper he walked, the colder the air became, the heat of the desert fading behind him until only cold stones remained.

Where was everyone? How were they even surviving in such a cold place? Why did the college instructors assigned to them let them go into the place? Well, it was difficult to control these two teams, especially, but this was just careless.

At first, the path seemed simple, a single trail winding downward between stone ridges and scattered dead trees, but after a while, the valley began to change. The ground split into multiple directions. Narrow passages appeared between towering rock formations, twisting sharply before vanishing into darkness. The deeper he moved, the less natural the valley felt. Massive slabs of broken rock leaned over the paths like collapsing ceilings, cutting away light and turning entire sections into shadow. Old ruins appeared without pattern, half-buried stairways leading nowhere, shattered pillars emerging from the ground at strange angles, fragments of walls standing alone in places they should not exist.

It indeed looked like someone or a tribe used to live within the rocks, yet now it looked dead and barren.

Every direction began to resemble the last. Long corridors of stone opened into dead ends, while other paths spiraled into narrow circular routes that quietly returned to where they started. The place was beginning to look like a maze. The maze did not feel unnatural to Sagiri. It did not feel like it was built, but it did not look like it was natural.

It felt twisted over centuries into something unnatural. Even sound behaved strangely there. Footsteps echoed from the wrong directions, and sometimes the valley carried noises from deeper within that vanished the moment he stopped moving. Boni slowly stopped feeling like a mere valley. It oddly felt alive to Sagiri.

He had always known Kiuga was smart, but it seemed like he was still a man and did not escape the manhood measuring contest. The ladies of Kafika were indeed something. It was hard not to feel competitive towards them. What was even more odd was that the place felt alive, yet Sagiri couldn't really pinpoint a sign of life, nor could he hear any heartbeats. His sense had grown sharper in the desert. Perhaps because his roots and tribe were from the south, he did not understand the logic.

Sagiri kept going deeper and deeper. He could also feel the fact that something wanted him to go further, so much further, so that he could not be able to come out. He could have sworn he was going in circles, but he knew he wasn't. The further he went. The colder it got.

Sagiri did not know how long he had been moving, but he knew he was close.

At some point, even Zaira stirred and opened its eyes before shutting them again.

"So you felt it too, huh? Can you breathe fire or something?" sagiri asked. He heard about a mythical creature that breathed fire. Well, that was only mythical anyway.

There was silence, of course. Had the place caused him to run mad, so much so that he could start thinking about mythical beasts.

Sagiri did not feel threatened in the slightest, but he was beginning to get worried about the two stupid squads and their even stupider instructors.

Sagiri stopped moving at some point. He was feeling a little hungry, and he needed to eat. Thank you, Seya, he thought. He ate the last of the ration left and drank the last of the water. Now he was trapped as well. He just hoped it did not take long to find the damned kids. For putting them in danger, he had a big bone to chew with the instructors.

His sitting for a while could help him think about any fact he had missed. sagiri climbed a rock and sat on it. He folded his legs under him, a bad habit from the meditative hours. It indeed made him relax.

It did not take him long before he felt something deeper in the valley. Six heartbeats or so. very faint.

six!

Where were the rest!

Chapter 282 INTO THE VALLEY

Sagiri moved quickly. He was sure he had six strong heartbeats. There was no mistake about that. He followed the sound further into the valley in the direction he had heard it. He could feel them getting fainter and fainter until it was gone. Even more, while he had run deeper into the cave, somehow it felt as if he had managed to go in circles, or if he was completely lost.

"Zaira, aren't you supposed to be like Oka and take me to the squad? You are really hopeless. If only your mother could see you shamelessly sleeping in enemy territory." Sagiri said, but Zaira did not even stir, and he did not slow down even one bit.

No wonder Kiuga had sent him a message. It has been almost two days now since he received the message, and he did not like the odds. There was a possibility that something bad had happened. If something had happened, Sagiri was going to flatten the valley so that whatever stayed in it or whoever did not have one rock to hide under.

Sagiri walked into a narrow crevice in the skyscraper rocks. He burst into a humongous cave under the mountainous rising rocks. It did not look habitable, but Sagiri had a sinking feeling the moment he stepped in. It was now undeniable that there was something inside the cave with him. He could not pinpoint its position, but he knew it was somewhere. Whatever, he had no business with lurking ebasts.

Sagiri turned around, but even with his right eye, all he could see were rocks. Rocks hanging around the cave. It looked unnaturally natural.

Could it be possible that there was a creature so strange that it did not have a heartbeat, like an overgrown worm, or one that was so smart enough to hide its presence?

Sagiri did not like the sound of that. If it were a big beast and he ended up standing on its belly, then it would be a huge problem. It would be better if he did not engage whoever with whatever it was inside the cave. He knew members of the squad could not willingly hide their presence from him when he was searching for them. Sagiri turned around to exit the cave, but as if it had never been there, there were no perfect rocks aligned there.

He must have mistaken it. Perhaps a little to his right or a little to the left, but somehow, a sinking feeling deep inside Sagiri's heart told him that the exit had really disappeared.

So the valley was alive?

That couldn't be it.

Deep in the valley, a group of youths was hiding. They did not dare move.

"Do you think Sika took the message?" Gavina shivered. She was so cold she did not know whether to laugh or cry.

"My bird is trained to even deliver messages in battle. We of the Anku tribe train the best war birds." Pavire answered.

"So then it is Sagiri who won't come," Nayira said. She was in no better state. She did not know how long she had been standing in the same position. hours? weeks? months. Well, it couldn't have been a month, but standing in the same position for a long time made time move more slowly. A day or two was fine, but more than that, even the strongest warriors could not take it. Especially doing it on an empty stomach.

Kiuga did not dare turn even his eyeballs too quickly. He was sitting close to Pavire, and the two were leaning against each other. They were probably the ones in the best positions apart from the rest.

"Don't speak of my little blind in that manner. He is an honourable man." Kiuga said.

"After Tagayia sent him away, what makes you think he will come back for us?" Nayira said.

"Don't keep speaking such words!" Kaka snapped. He was standing in the worst position. One small move and he would go tumbling, yet he had been standing on one leg as if it was nothing. He had not complained or grown impatient to wait. "He could never do that. He will be here." Kaka said. They always ended up going at each other's throats with Nayira, but Nayira did not seem to have any more energy to argue this time, so she just shivered and pulled her hands tightly around herself.

"The southerner better hurry before we turn to ice!" Miat groaned. He was standing at the far side, his hands folded to his chest.

"I should not have followed you. We should have just volunteered to patrol the gates of the war academy. Now I am going to die here, and my parents will never find even my bones to bury." Ulekai

cried. The boy had not grown out of his fear, and he had not stopped weeping ever since things had gone wrong.

Things had seemed fine when they entered the valley, and they had not at all expected them to turn to this. It was darker than usual even during the day, but if they entered the valley and came back alive, then they would get the highest score.

The college did not have a say on where the students wanted to earn their merits from, but when squad 25 had suggested to the merit instructor jokingly, to visit the valley. He had said it is among the dark zones where no student had ever entered before for the mere exercise.

Kiuga was just fooling around, saying he wanted to be the first. The merits of going into the valley were not only the highest score, but also allowed a privilege to choose which section they wanted to serve after they graduated.

Of course, the squad was only curious and wanted to milk some information on the Boni valley, but then the Kafika 1 squad had heard the back-and-forth conversation with the instructor. Anyone can imagine how this escalated from there since the squads were bitter rivals. They fought for points, and the two top squad positions had not been taken by anyone but them. There was a seesaw effect on how they exchanged positions. No one had been allowed to stay comfortable on one. Even more unfortunate was that the yearly score between the two squads was tied. A staggering eight hundred and sixty-two points across all ten areas a warrior was supposed to be good in.

Kafika 1 had immediately jumped in on the idea of going too. Well, Gavina had said her squad would go into the valley to earn their merits too. At that point, things suddenly took a sour turn. Galka 25 would not admit that they had just been jesting around and did not mean any of the words they said.

The manhood measuring contest had officially begun, then and then

"We of Kafika are going into the valley too. Can't let you get all the glory now, can we?" Gavina had said her neck held high. Neither of the two had stopped fighting for the honour of their academies. Galka might have led in the high school exam, but only by a few points. Gavina was determined to rectify that. "We were just joking..." Ulekai had started to say, but someone quickly covered his mouth.

"I must say the valley is no place for ladies to follow men into," Kiuga had surprised himself, too, with how competitive he had become.

"Since you insist on following us everywhere. Make sure not to slow us down." Kaka snarled.

"Who said we are coming with you? We will be going in alone, and we will be the first to come out." Nayira sneered back.

"Well, we just have to find out." Maita joined in.

That is how the horror story began.

Chapter 283 INTO THE VALLEY II

The twenty-one had soon become twenty-two because Lira, who had not stopped following squad 25. They were still one member short, but anytime someone dared join, Kaka would make them suffer so much that they quit. Only one had dared, and he had not lasted. Perhaps it was because the squad did not want to give away Sagiri's sport. Even so, Lira had become their shadow so much that they had grown weary of sending her away. She was now like a shadow member of the squad. She fought well and was smart, but sometimes she behaved like a child or just said weirdly odd things.

She had even asked Kiuga once if he remembered where he was born because she didn't.

The twenty-two had entered the valley midday, nine days ago. It was cold and dark and mostly silent, but nothing was odd. They were not planning to stay long, just entering the valley that everyone avoided for decades, and coming out alive was all they needed to do to get the highest merit score.

Then quickly, they realized how bad their decision was. Not only was it cold, continuously cold as if the very cold itself was seeping into the bone. The instructors were only there to see them successfully go in and come out. It would ensure there was no cheating. The warrior initiates, wherever the merit mission they would be going on, were afforded flares. To fire a red one in case they wanted aid, and the white flare if the situation had turned deadly and they needed to be pulled out immediately.

They soon realized the deeper they went, the odder something was. Lira had said something was watching them or someone, but even with their intensive training, the squads could not hear anything.

Oka shivered with fear with every step they took, and soon she had slithered underneath Gavina's combat coat.

At that point, the squads had decided to go back. They wanted to go as deep as possible before going out, but they could not ignore the uneasy air in the place. They only had to enter the valley and come out, so even though the instructors were just there to watch and give back their feedback to the college, they had suggested that the two squads go back.

The two squads were a bit bored, but they had only entered the valley for merits. They started their return journey.

They were sure they had only walked around for two hours in the valley before deciding to go back out, but as hours went by without them finding the exit, the cause for alarm had increased.

"Could we have missed the exit?" Kiuga was the first to sound his worry. He was, after all, the best strategist, and he had a smart head attached to his neck. Everyone had the feeling that something was wrong, but they had hoped the exit would pop out at some point.

"There is no way. We hadn't even gone further in, yet now we have been walking for almost five, and the exit is not getting closer." Zazarie said.

"Could we be going in circles?" Pavire asked.

"Impossible. You know Oka doesn't get lost." Gavina said, but it was clear there was worry in his voice. Oka had not come out from under her coat ever since he hid away, and Gavina knew that was a bad signal.

Oka was not so easily scared, but this time he had not stopped trembling.

"Could we be stuck under an illusion...." Ulekai panicked even deeper. It was a wonder how a boy like him was in a squad like Squad 25. Even with his abilities in fighting and a slightly smart head on his neck, it was clear he did not fit in the madness

"Let's get out of here and quickly, everybody run!!" Kiuga said after a moment of silence.

Everyone moved at Kiuga's command. They ran as fast as they could for the exit, but soon it was clear that they were not getting anywhere. No matter how fast they ran, their exit did not come any closer. In fact, the faster they ran, the more the feeling that they were stuck in a maze increased.

"Everyone, stop!!" Kiuga announced after a while. He always remained calm in tough situations, but this time, even he could feel the invisible blade hanging over his head. This was not just any situation. They were for sure trapped now, and they did not know whether they had been running deeper into the maze or, worse, just running in circles. "Something is wrong."

"Of course it is. We could have been out by now." Kaka said, circling a bit as if checking for enemies, before he stopped.

"Are we going to die? Is this an illusion?" Ulekai asked again.

"No, this isn't an illusion. This is something else. Our watches are working just fine." Kiuga refuted.

"Don't tell me we are stuck in something worse than an illusion," Gavina said. Her vice was still strong, but there was now some fear in it.

The worst part is that they could not see the enemy, and they did not know what they were up against.

"We need to stay calm and think clearly," Kiuga said.

"This is indeed odd." Ntao the Kafika 1 instructor said.

"I should have stopped you sooner," Ataku the Galka 25 instructor on the mission chimed in.

"This is not the time to think of what we could or could not have done. We could have come anyway, even if you denied it." Gavina said.

"Should we fire the flares and call in help?" Lira said, and everyone turned to her. She was sitting on the floor on a small rock, chewing on something that looked like a stick. She was unbothered but completely bothered at the same time. She was an odd nut.

"We should. We can't wait until it gets bad," Kiuga said. He had come to learn that it was better to take action in situations you did not understand and call for help than to wait for things to get worse.

"No, we won't! That will lower our marks. Even if we get the merit. We will not get the privilege." Pavire said.

"Well, I am speaking for squad 25. If you ladies want to stay in this valley and die for the merit. Be my guest." Kiuga said in a serious tone this time. He was now wearing the face of a general, and everyone on squad 25 nodded before retrieving the red and the white flares at the same time.

pop!

pop!

The sound of the almost two dozen flares tore through the silence of the valley.

Chapter 284 THE CHASE

The sound of the almost two dozen flares tore through the silence of the valley. Now they could wait for the boom. The two squads watched them rise into the darkness and mist. They waited for the burst to light the sky, but it never came. The squads waited another moment, but nothing came.

"Why are they taking so long?" Someone muttered. They all waited another moment, but nothing. They had just fired all their flares, and just imagining their signal did not even make it out of the valley was horrific.

"Something wrong with your flare? Did you fire them the right way? " Gavina said. Perhaps she had been selfishly counting on squad 25 to be pulled out so her squad could ride with it and get to keep their merits and privileges.

"Over a dozen flares malfunctioning at the same time? Not possible." N'varu refuted.

"This can't be..." Kiuga said. He had never been stuck in a situation before, and he didn't know how to act at all. He had just pulled his last move to pull his squad out, and somehow things had gone from bad to worse.

"...we are trapped," Ulekai said with horror before he fell backward and sat down.

"Can your squad fire theirs?" Kiuga asked. Gavina looked torn between looking up and the sky that was now invisible. covered by nightfall as if waiting for the flares to light the sky, but that never came.

"Maybe we should wait a moment, perhaps the flares are taking time to burst..." she said in a divided tone as if she still wanted to get the privilege at the expense of her life.

"Are you stupid? Flares travel faster than the fastest arrow. They take three heartbeats at most after they are fired to burst! Kaka snarled. "Don't tell me you are still thinking about not using your flares because you hope for a privilege." Kaka sneered.

Gavina bit her inner lip before she turned to her squad.

"Fire your....!" She was not done moving when something moved. The flares they had fired came raining back down and fell just around them.

"Run!!" Kiuga did not hesitate. Flares, though not harmful. If twenty of them went off around you, they could mess with your hearing for a while and even disorient or even hurt you.

Both squads followed Kiuga's lead, and it was every man for himself before they finally stopped and his mere second before the flares went off. The sound was deafening in the silent valley. The place lit up for a while, and it was clear that they were stuck between endless mountains of rocks.

The squads crawled out from behind the crevices where they had been hiding for a while, and there was a moment of silence as everyone watched the now-empty shells of the flares as they hoped what they were seeing was just a dream, and it did not exist.

"What is happening..." A voice muttered, but no one answered. No one had ever been in this kind of situation before, and there was a shared sinking feeling of horror.

"We are all gonna die..." A girl on Gavina's squad said, her lips trembling.

Kiuga stood frozen. His smart brain was working overtime trying to come up with a solution, but with the look on his face, it was clear even he did not know how to get out of such a situation.

"We should perhaps find a high ground and fire it, as it seems something is blocking the flares. I hear sometimes valleys like this don't let anything fly out." A calm voice said after a while. The squads turned around to hear a voice that was always silent, even when they bickered or went for one another's necks.

Banga.

He had never shown fear on his face, and at the moment, his expression was the same. You could say that he and Ulekai were opposites. After a moment of admiration for his calmness, everyone turned to Kiuga, who was now trying to gather himself.

"We do as Banga says. Let's find a high ground, and then squad Gavin can fire the flares." Sagiri said. No one debated this time, and the teams began to move close together before they moved out. Taking a head count was also necessary.

"Guys..." a voice said.

Lira.

She was staring into the darkness. No one could see what she was staring at, and no one dared to make sudden movements as they all turned around slowly and stared into the darkness in the direction she was currently looking.

"What is it?" Kiuga whispered loudly after a moment of nothing moving.

"I saw something move in that direction. It is huge." Lira said her eyes never left the darkness for even a second.

"What do you mean? It is totally silent." Maita said, trying to squint his eyes. He, of course, could not see anything deep in the darkness. He could only use his trained sight to see a few feet ahead of him, not more than three.

"Yes. If I were not looking, I could have missed it." Lira said. She had sharp eyes even in the dark. She was only second to Sagiri in sight.

"She is right. Something is moving in on us." Nvaru said. His eyes were white now as he stared into the darkness ahead. Even worse, he could see more clearly than anyone what was coming.

Right then, there was movement, and everyone fell silent. It was sure that something had moved this time. Had the flares summoned something or disturbed the sleep of some beast? Beasts weren't scary to them, that much, and even if it were a gravescale, they would very much kill it. It won't take even the two squads this time.

"D-Did something... just move?" Ulekai stuttered.

No one answered him, but everyone started backing down on instinct.

"Everyone, make sure your friend is close to you!!" Kiuga said in a slightly raised voice, and as if answering his voice, the shadows began to move even quicker. They were now at least a hundred feet away. Kiuga had managed to pull himself together, and not even his voice could betray the fear inside of him.

"I wish Sagiri were here." Kiuga muttered under his breath as he waited for everyone to find their friend silently.

"Mine is here." A girl said. The sequence was followed until everyone was accounted for.

"Now we run. Make sure not to get separated!!" Kiuga said before he turned around and started running.

As if whatever was chasing them just became more excited, the sounds became louder as if they were in hundreds, if not thousands.

"They sound like....

....rocks."

Lira said running at the centre of the squads.

Chapter 285 ROCK BEAST

"Is this an attempt to keep me grounded?" Sagiri asked no one in particular as his eyes scanned the place. Perfect rocks, nothing out of place. Sagiri walked forward, his breathing calm.

"Now that I am trapped, why don't you come out and play?" Sagiri said, walking forward again. If the quads were trapped in such a manner, then he did not have time to waste. Being trapped with no way out is the same as being buried alive.

Sagiri moved into the centre of the humongous cave, but nothing else moved. He did not have to waste. Whatever was in here must have needed hiding in the rocks because he could not see any opening anywhere. It was a perfect grave. Well, too bad he wasn't planning to die yet. Sagiri peered his eyes into the rocks, but nothing moved. Well, a beast that smart could not be easy to find. He would be disappointed if he found it on the first try.

"Good at hiding, aren't you?" Sagiri sighed.

"Nokai!" he called, and Nokai answered immediately. It sprang out of the archive pocket. The blades had grown longer, and right now they glimmered dangerously in the darkness. Nokai had grown stronger in the south, and now the blade could split into ten.

Sagiri held the blade in front of him firmly. It had been stirring since he entered the cave, and it hummed softly in his hands now. He swung the blade around, cutting through the darkness of the cave, before he threw the blades in the air. Nokai span around before with a snap into split into ten.

"Tear through the rocks until you find the bastard," Sagiri said calmly, standing at the centre of the cave.

The air crackled with electricity as the blades tore through the air, momentary flashes of light as they moved to answer their master's command.

blade met rock in quick sessions. The assault went on for a few heartbeats, but nothing changed or barged.

"Cut deeper!" Sagiri said his voice was deadly calm.

It did not take long before a scream filled the air. more like a wail that sagiri had never heard one.

Then two, then more and more, and sagiri tilted his head to look at the source. Right then, a rock tumbled from the top of the cave. Only the rock was bleeding....

The creature blended into the cave perfectly, so perfectly that it was almost impossible to notice until it moved. Its body looked less like flesh and more like a mass of broken stone forced into the shape of a living thing, layers of dark rock stacked unevenly across its back and shoulders like fragments of a collapsed cliff. Cracks ran through its body in thin jagged lines. Its limbs were thick and heavy, ending in blunt claws worn down like weathered rock, each movement grinding against the earth with a harsh scraping sound.

Loose gravel spilled from its shoulders when it moved, chunks of hardened rock breaking free and crashing onto the cave floor. Its limbs unfolded with unnatural weight, thick arms dragging against stone before lifting a body that looked carved rather than born. The creature's head barely separated from its torso, its face hidden beneath overlapping layers of rock except for two narrow glowing slits buried deep within the darkness of its skull. Every movement echoed through the cave with the sound of grinding stone, as though the cavern itself had come alive and pulled itself away from the wall.

Sagiri paused for a moment as he took in the creature before him.

A rock beast.

They had gone extinct centuries ago. Guess not. No wonder he could not find them. They were creatures whose hearts were buried under their rocky bodies so that they could not be heard. They were perfect rocks. The creature in itself is small, but its rocky exterior covering every inch of its body is huge enough to be the size of the big cats Salka kept. On top of that, the rock crawler is a lazy beast. It eats once every few years. They eat grass and small undergrowth. That said, they don't eat flesh. They were not holding him hostage to eat him, but just to starve him until he died.

The rock crawlers move in hundreds so that they can suffocate the enemy to death if need be. Their skin can not be broken by blades. But Nokai was no normal blade, and even so, it had taken a few tries to shatter the shell and reach the beasts hiding deep within.

"How cowardly of you to bury me alive when you could have just pretended to be rocks," Sagiri said, still staring at the beast with awe.

He understood why the beasts would want to be hidden. If anyone knew they existed, then they would come to hunt so they could take the rock shells to make armour. Many could die in this quest, but people are greedy, and even to acquire a little gain, they could keep coming until the valley was finally flattened.

Perhaps his squad was the greedy people. Why could they come to hunt for merits in such a place? sagiri sighed. He did not wish to grieve the beast, but now that blood had been drawn, there was no backing out. The cave shifted as if it were alive. Now he understood why anyone would think that the cave was alive. With the rock beast moving like that, it could only look like a cave was moving. They had come to look like the very rocks of the valley. It could be hard to even tell if you were standing on top of one or just a natural rock. by them, you realized you could be trapped and waiting to die from hunger, cold, or suffocation.

"Now will you boys be nice and open the entry. I don't want to kill you when I am the one who has trespassed on your habitat." Of course, they could not hear him. They only knew survival. They only knew how to keep living.

Nokai had folded back to one and was now resting on sagiri's hand. The beast started raining from all over, falling into their beastly formations around him. As much as they do not eat flesh, their jaws are

strong enough to hold themselves hanging like rocks with the help of their limbs. They were going to kill him.

What a tragedy.

Chapter 286. ROCK BEASTS

The cave exploded into motion the moment the first beast lunged. Stone cracked beneath its weight as it tore itself from the wall of beasts, one massive arm swinging toward Sagiri with enough force to collapse rock on impact. Sagiri moved instantly, sliding beneath the strike as the arm smashed into another beast beside him, the entire wall bursting apart in a rain of shattered stone as the two went flying into the cavern wall.

Dust filled the air. Another shape moved through it. A second beast. Then a third. What had looked like part of the cave moments ago began pulling itself free from the darkness around him. Sagiri drew Nokai and drove forward before they could fully surround him, his blade carving across the nearest creature's rock-hard shell. Sparks burst from the impact instead of blood.

The strike cut deep enough to split layers of rock apart, exposing glowing fractures beneath, but the creature barely slowed. It swung downward immediately. Sagiri twisted away as the fist crashed into the ground, the cave floor exploding upward beneath him. He planted one foot against falling debris and launched himself higher, rebounding off the cavern wall as another beast charged through the dust below.

Nokai flashed downward in a sharp arc, splitting through the creature's shoulder and carving a glowing line through its body. The beast staggered but kept moving. Its massive hand slammed into Sagiri midair, throwing him violently across the cavern. He hit the wall hard enough to crack the stone behind him before pushing off again instantly as another strike crushed the exact spot where he had landed. The cave shook continuously now.

The hit was not enough to hurt Sagiri, but he was measuring the strength of the damned beasts. They were strong indeed. If the two squads were foolish enough to engage, then they probably were dead. Normal blades are useless against them, and now that they were enraged, they were total monsters.

They formed pillars upon each other to meet him in the air.

Massive arms tore up the stone pillars, collapsing sections of the cavern while Sagiri moved between falling debris and crushing blows at full speed, his body twisting through impossibly small gaps as Nokai struck again and again at the glowing fractures hidden beneath the creatures' rocky shells. Every clash sounded like metal crashing against mountains. One beast grabbed for him with both arms. Sagiri stepped onto the incoming limb, sprinted along it, then drove Nokai directly into the creature's skull. The glowing cracks across its body burst outward instantly, light flooding through the fractures before the entire upper half of the beast collapsed apart in an avalanche of broken rock. The others came faster after that, roaring through the cave as though the mountain itself had awakened to kill him.

The cave erupted even further as the Rock Crawlers moved. Turns out the cave was made only of rock crawlers, and they just kept coming. They had created a cave just to trap him. What had looked like uneven stone scattered across the cavern floor continuously unfolded into bodies, dozens of them tearing themselves free from the walls and ground with violent grinding sounds.

Smaller than the great stone beasts but far faster, the Crawlers rushed across the cave on long jagged limbs, their clawed hands scraping sparks from the rock as they climbed walls and ceilings with unnatural speed. Sagiri moved the instant the first reached him. Nokai flashed across the darkness, splitting one clean through the torso, rock fragments exploding outward, but two more were already lunging through the debris.

He ducked low again as one flew over him, its claws tearing deep grooves into the cave wall behind him, then twisted sharply and drove his blade upward through another as it descended from the ceiling. The impact shattered glowing cracks across its body before it collapsed into loose stone at his feet. More kept coming. The Crawlers moved like a swarm through the cavern, pouring from narrow cracks and dark tunnels in relentless waves, using the cave itself to attack from every angle. One sprinted sideways across the wall before launching directly at his head. Sagiri stepped aside at the last instant, and the creature smashed through a stone pillar instead, bringing part of the ceiling down around them.

Dust swallowed the cave. Shapes rushed through it immediately. Sagiri pushed forward through the collapse instead of retreating, weaving between snapping claws and crushing limbs as Nokai carved glowing lines through rocky bodies around him. The cavern shook continuously under the force of the fight. Crawlers burst from the walls, dropped from above, and rushed low across the ground, forcing Sagiri into constant motion.

He rebounded off broken stone, spun through narrow gaps between attacks, and cut through creatures mid-air while debris crashed around him. Every strike against them sounds like a stone breaking under

impossible force. Still, they kept coming, endless shapes crawling through the darkness of Boni's caves as though the mountain itself was trying to bury him alive beneath claws and rock.

Sagiri reaped into the air as much as possible to avoid all the hundreds of attacks, and Nokai split into ten by his command. Nokai was a blade of the desert, and Sagiri called onto the sand while his blades went to work. He had become more accustomed to the desert dance, and the sand had always responded anytime he did it. He could just crush the very core of Boni Valley, but he did not know yet where. If he did that, he could just risk burying them alive.

Zaira had not stirred again, even as the battle got deadly.

"Aren't you supposed to help me find my friends?" Sagiri said as sand formed under his feet, forming pillars for him to jump from one to another. he would wait until he found the squads before he did anything extreme.

Sagiri managed to get away from the beasts. Nokai was still engaging the beasts, so he could have a breather.

The pillar he currently stood on rose higher with him. He needed to leave the ground of boni. Those beasts were creating false passages and ways.

When he was high enough that he could see all the jagged peaks of Boni Valley, he stopped. He pushed the archive out all over the valley. He calmed his senses and sent them out as far as he could. His ears were not going to miss anything this time.

One heartbeat of silence went by, then another. The beasts were forming their own pillars to reach him quickly, even with Nokai slowing them down, but he remained calm. What mattered was to find them first.

One heartbeat, two.... twenty...then another... went by.

Then....

Faintly, just as the four pillars of rock beats rose to his level, he felt something.

Fear. desperation....

Found you!

Sagiri snapped his eyes open just as one lunged at him. This was going to hurt a little. Sagiri brazed himself to dodge the attack and free-fall while forming another sand pillar.

The beast did not reach him before an arrow tore through a crevice on its lower body. How skillful. The beast went tumbling, but more were still coming, only they were facing the same fate. Sagiri steadied himself immediately and shot his right eye in the direction the arrows had come from.

Salka.

He was holding a bow and another arrow on the ready. Beside him, Lotaga was holding a bow and arrow. Same to Yavaga, Matasi and Kolu, of course, with two big cats beside Salka. So they were the six heartbeats Sagiri had felt earlier, except Salka's. The man was a literal shadow and the best at it.

Lotaga was waving madly. More beasts were still coming, and Sagiri took the divergence of them defending him to make his own call for more sand for more pillars to reach them.

Chapter 287. SAND

Lotaga was waving madly. More beats were still coming, and sagiri took the divergence of them defending him to make his own call for more sand for more pillars to reach them.

"What is a southerner doing in Tagayia?" Salka said in a serious tone when Sagiri was finally standing in front of him.

"Good to see you again, Captain..." Sagiri said with a little salute. He was barely done when he was tackled so hard he almost fell over. Lotaga had him airborne and in a tight hug, so much so that it could crush him.

"I thought you abandoned me, but as soon as you knew Salka had forced me into this damned valley, you came to save me." Lotaga cried, squeezing the hell out of Sagiri. He had not changed one bit and had grown even worse and more shameless. A man showing so much affection to another man?

Shameless!

Sagiri tried to struggle out of it, but it was futile. The man had grown stronger and more bothersome.

"I-I..." Sagiri wanted to say he had actually not come to get him, but Lotaga cut him off.

"I knew you still saw me as your favorite instructor." Lotaga wept again. Sagiri quit struggling and just let the torture happen. There was no stopping Lotaga.

A blade hand to the middle of Lotaga's head from Salka was the one thing that saved him.

"Can you have even a little dignity? A man acting like a child." Salka humphed. Lotaga groaned but stepped back, wiping a tear.

So dramatic.

"I see you managed to offend even the rock beasts. We have been here longer than you, I assume, and we have managed to avoid them." Salka said, watching the carnage with the beasts and Nokai.

"Well, they wanted to bury me alive. What are you doing here anyway?"

"I am wondering the same question. The captain here brought us into this death trap to chase a bird." Yavaga said his face pulled into a pout.

"A bird?" Sagiri asked.

"Yes, the bird looked to be from the Anku clan with a collar on it. It came into this valley, and it looked distressed. The owner must be in here." Salka said.

"Ooh, that Pavire's bird. Galka 25 and Kafika 1 squads sent the bird south, so I came to find them," Sagiri said, and Lotaga gasped.

"So you didn't come for me?" Lotaga's jaw hung open as if this were the betrayal of the century. Sagiri wanted to roll his eyes, but he was glad to find familiar faces.

"You too," Sagiri said, his eyes not leaving Salka.

"Don't enable him." Kolu groaned and slapped his face.

"What could college squads be doing in this valley?" Salka shook his head. "Did I really fail that much as a marshal and captain?"

"Don't tell me it's for the college merits and privileges," Matasi asked as if that could be furthest from the truth.

When sagiri remained silent, the five men sighed in unison.

"So you haven't been able to find them?" Salka asked.

"I have. I have to go now before the hornet's nest I just poked reaches them."

"Nokai!!" Sagiri called, and the blades whooshed through the air. They were still split into ten.

"These beasts don't get affected by normal blades? Want mine?" Sagiri asked.

"We don't need to cut their shells. Besides, they are scared of my pets. My pets are still the deadliest beasts in the animal hierarchy. Even a gravescale could do well to stay away." Salka bragged.

"Fine then. Go east, I will catch up after I bury these beasts," Sagiri said. The archive stirred to answer to his inner resolve. Now that he knew his squad was not in the close vicinity, he was going to deal with the rock crawlers accordingly. Since Salka and his squad were self-sufficient, he snapped Nokai into one before he swirled around. Salka and his cats and squad were already pulling away.

"Don't die, kid," Lotaga said, being the last to join his squad.

The moment they gained distance, Sagiri turned to the hundreds of beasts who were approaching. They seemed to have a personal grudge against him. He just killed one of their own, and the beasts were vindictive, it seemed.

"Now then..." Sagiri said, jumping onto a sand pillar, then another. He made sure to go a little west so that the impact could not touch Salka's team. The markings on his body stirred and crawled to his arm. He let them form rings around his fist, and Nokai too. They were made of rocks, so it could take double strength to vanquish them. Sagiri's pillar grew higher and higher this time, lifting him high above the valley floor, till he was standing well over the peaks of the place. The archive hardened around him, forming a shield to welcome his intended descent.

Rock Crawlers swarmed around its base in endless numbers. Sand cascaded down the sides in roaring streams as the creatures climbed over each other trying to reach him, their claws tearing through the shifting surface only for more sand to collapse beneath them. Sagiri stood motionless at the peak, dark robes swirling in the wind while Nokai burned in his grip, the blade flooding with the full force of the Archive.

Thin fractures of light crawled along its edge, spreading into the air around him as the pressure thickened so heavily that even the valley itself seemed to groan under it. The ground below began to tremble. Cracks spread outward through the floor around the pillar while the Crawlers shrieked and surged upward faster.

Sagiri stood still for one moment at the peak of the sand pillar, for a moment taking in the details before he moved closer to the edge of the pillar.

Then Sagiri raised Nokai slowly overhead before he jumped off the pillar. He made his descent forceful so it could tear down with so much force to aid whatever he intended to do, and brought it down in one absolute motion when he was close enough to the floor, which he could not even see with how packed the rock crawlers were.

The world split. A massive rupture tore across the valley floor from the base of the pillar, ripping forward with explosive force as sand, rock, and entire sections of earth were thrown into the air. The shockwave swallowed the swarm instantly, carving a colossal scar straight through the land while Sagiri collapsed into the chaos below.

He did not stop there. They could just climb up. He called for more sand and jumped onto a sand pillar. The sand began to rise and bury away the beasts until there was flat sand for 20v at least. That could keep them grounded for weeks if not months.

It was now time to go and beat some sense into squad 25.

Chapter 288. REUNION

Weaving sand was tiring, especially since he wasn't in the desert and his strength had been depleted rapidly. He needed to get the squads as soon as he could. With Nokai in his right hand, Sagiri started moving East. They were not out of the woods yet. He might have buried the stone beasts alive, but he knew the place was still crawling with them. The impact of his ascent had destabilized the whole valley, and soon their siblings pretending to be rocks could come crawling.

Even further east, the squads had heard the sudden, large impact that shook the place.

"What is that?" Someone said as everyone suddenly got alert.

"He is here," Kiuga said, a small smile breaking on his lips. "I knew he could come."

Even so, the group dared not move. They knew their adversaries were not too far out. The place was dark anyway, and they could not tell rock from creature. That was not the only reason they were not moving, however. They were so cold that they could not move. Lips had turned white, and at this point, they were hanging onto life by a thread. Hunger and dehydration were their other enemies.

Sagiri, on the other hand, did not have time to waste running. He pushed the archive out to where he could perceive the Salka squad, but only stopped for a moment.

"I will go on right ahead." He said, catching in a second.

"Did you have to wake the whole valley?" Matasi said, shaking his head.

"Fine. Go ahead." Salka said, not stopping a moment, and Sagiri had a little challenge catching up at his running speed. The squad was almost there anyway. They moved awfully fast. Just like Sagiri was gone again. He pushed the archive out to just where he knew they could be and moved within the archive.

The place he stopped was so cold. There was only one opening above the ground, a few feet high. The heartbeats were faint, but he could hear them clearly now. He jumped in one huge leap and landed on the opening. His markings were still crawling under his skin, providing a little light to the otherwise dark cave.

The two squads looked nothing like warriors. Their uniforms were torn and darkened by dirt and dried blood, faces hollow from exhaustion, movements slow and guarded even while resting. Some sat against walls and some against each other. It looked like they were keeping silent and as steady as possible. It must have been Kiuga's idea, and perhaps it has saved them. Any small movement, and the rock crawlers could have come to bury them alive. That could have proved harder even for him to find them. The rock beast did not have good hearing, but any slight movement and they could catch even from hundreds of vaara away.

Weapons lay close to every hand. No one in Boni truly slept, and it was evident they hadn't slept for a moment. The moment Sagiri stepped into the cave, heads snapped toward him instantly, several blades half-raised before recognition settled in. For a second, nobody spoke. Sagiri looked over them quietly, eyes moving across the injuries and the bad state they were in.

Then he exhaled lightly beneath the mask.

"You lot look terrible," he said flatly. "Boni tamed you that badly?" Sagiri mocked. Served them right for acting stupid.

The tension inside the cave broke almost immediately after hearing his voice, the kind that only people at death's door experienced when rescue actually came.

For a few seconds, nobody moved after recognizing him. The exhaustion hanging over the ruins seemed to loosen all at once, shoulders dropping, weapons lowering, some of them almost laughing from pure relief while others simply sat there staring at Sagiri like they were making sure he was actually real. Gavina was one of those who were wounded. She was a remarkable woman for holding on even after going through such. She let out a breath that sounded dangerously close to breaking. She was fighting the urge to cry, but blinked away her tears.

Typical Tsanka women strive to be cold even when softness is required. Her trembling lips, however, were all too telling that she was suffering. Lira was asleep. Somehow, she was managing better than everyone. Well, she had grown up in places colder than the cave.

"Sagiri," weak voices filled the cold cave.

"Sagiri..." Kiuga breathed in relief.

"I thought you were better than this. I am disappointed." Sagiri said in a slightly raised voice. Kiuga did not answer, but Sagiri could feel his guilt eating him alive. They all looked guilty. Sagiri looked at all of them in silence before shaking his head slightly.

"Idiots," he said flatly. "Are merits worth dying for?" A few weak sighs answered him, though nobody really argued.

They looked too tired for pride, and most heads lowered in shame. Sagiri stepped further into the cave, eyes moving over the wounded.

"What took you so long from the south anyway?" Kaka said. He still managed to look prideful even with the bit of shame rolling off of him.

"Unlike you kids who desire death so much, I was on my way to the Capital to retrieve something important, but I had to come, babysit, and beat some sense into you."

"You should've thought this through instead of thinking with your manhood. If I took any longer, I'd be carrying corpses back instead." His tone stayed cold, but it sounded more like frustration than anger. Then his gaze sharpened slightly.

"Enough resting. Can everyone here still walk?" Silence followed for a moment before tired hands started pushing against the ground, and warriors slowly forced themselves upright despite the pain, but sat down right after. They were hopeless.

"We need to keep moving. You are going to have to crawl at this point or get buried alive."

"One instructor went to pull away the beasts, and he didn't come back. The other has a broken leg." Kiuga said, gathering himself, and began giving Sagiri the useful information. The injured instructor lay still and unconscious. The cold was the only thing keeping his wound up uninfected.

"I can't perceive him. He might be dead or buried alive." Sagiri said, and there were gasps.

"He can't..." One of the girls stammered.

"That is what happens when you get greedy. People die." Sagiri said his voice came harsher than he intended, but he meant every word.

"You are not kids anymore. You are to be warriors soon, captains and generals. You can't lead your teams into danger just because of pride." Sagiri chastised again. He had had to be a chief and responsible for life, and he could not imagine making such a careless decision.

"Sagiri is right. This was stupid." Salka landed at the mouth of the cave in a crouch. He was too tall to stand straight in the place.

"Captain..." They all greeted in shock, even trying to stand straight, but most failed. Only Kaka was still standing straight.

"We need to move, they are coming in hundreds. The whole valley had come alive after your stunt." Salka turned to sagiri before looking at the group.

"That is futile. They can't make it three steps without collapsing." Sagiri said.

"We have lost our instructor..." Pavire said, her voice hoarse. It was clear she hadn't spoken in a while.

"If he went against them himself, he would be dead," Salka said, and there were more grieved feelings flying around. That was the highest probability, however. Even the 21 surviving was still a miracle.

"Please, you have to find him..." Gavina said in a small voice. That was the most feminine voice he had had him use.

"They must be deluded from exhaustion, Captain." Matasi's voice said from below and behind Salka.

"We really need to move, now, Captain." He insisted.

Everyone in the cave could hear the distressed growls of Salka's pets.

"I can get them out. Will you be fine, captain?" Salka asked. Salka did not even ask how. He just nodded and turned around.

"Fine, we will catch up."

Chapter 289. A RIDE

"You guys need a ride?" Sagiri said with a sadistic smile, the moment Salka and his team pulled away to either look for the missing instructor or

He was going to enjoy suffocating for a few seconds, if not a minute or two.

Sagiri stepped into the center of the cave and stretched his hands out to prepare for the movement. The Archive responded instantly. This was going to take a lot of energy, if not all.

The Archive expanded outward violently around them and ahead of them, Sagiri forcing it through the valley itself. It stretched farther and farther into Boni like an invisible hand tearing through distance, pushing past stone corridors, broken rocks, twisting paths, and collapsed terrain toward the distant exit of the valley.

The strain became visible almost immediately. The markings on his body fractured lightly, while the air trembled under the force required to maintain it. Then Sagiri opened his eyes. Without another word, he stepped forward, and the entire pocket moved with him. The twenty-one did not have time to react before they were swallowed.

The two got swallowed into the archive pocket, and Sagiri finally moved. Sagiri dragged the entire space toward the valley's distant edge in one move, which took at least twenty heartbeats considering the weight of everything.

Sagiri stopped finally, just a few feet from the entrance of the valley, and let them tumble out. He staggered back a moment before steadying himself.

"Next time you try this feat, I will kill you myself," Sagiri said, making sure his right eye met every one around before it turned back to the dormant red with a swirl of amber. There was silence as the group tried to take in their surroundings. Those who had been with him to Tatani had already experienced this and were familiar with the pocket, but the others looked like they had seen death for the few seconds they couldn't breathe.

"Thank you," Kaka said, bowing slightly.

That was the first time Sagiri had heard him utter such words, and he was taken aback, unable to process them for a second. Everyone turned to look at him with worry. Had he suffered so much, he would have gone mad.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I always show gratitude." The words made even the still unconscious instructor sit up straight.

"Of course you do," Maita said dramatically.

"What do you mean by that tone?" Kaka gritted.

Kiuga was fighting to say something, but before he could, Sagiri lifted his hand to silence everyone. He turned swiftly and retrieved Nokai. Everyone froze at the sudden change. Sagiri skulked low, ready to charge at anything. He was sure he had heard movement. Nothing moved after, and silence followed so much that Sagiri thought he had imagined it.

Suddenly, however, something moved, and Sagiri could see a shell of a rock crawler moving slowly towards the exit. He had not thought that he could see one so far out, but it was not completely out of the question.

"Aren't you so far from the pack?" Sagiri said, moving quickly to dismantle the loner, but suddenly it fell sideways, and underneath there was a human. Sagiri stopped immediately and retracted his blades.

"Instructor!!" The girls wailed at the same time, and this time a tear fell from Gavina's eyes, which she wiped away immediately.

"The instructor looked out of breath. Well, the rock shell was massive, and it looked like he had been moving for days. It was a wonder he had not collapsed or passed away.

"You are alive," N'varu said with relief, echoing everyone's thoughts.

The man staggered to his feet just as the girls swarmed his side. They had been unable to walk, but now they had crossed the distance in a few seconds.

"I am okay. I was about to go find help." The man reminded Sagiri of someone careless. Lotaga. Not only had he led away the beast, but he also wore a shell. Even worse, he had not stripped the students under him of entering the valley. Sagiri's fist tightened, and right when the man staggered past the girls, Sagiri moved and landed a blow to his cheek.

He had desired to beat some sense into someone, but he had not been able to do that until he saw the instructor. He could have beaten the other one if he hadn't already been unconscious.

The man's jaw cracked under the force of the punch before he went flying backwards and hit the valley's rocky floor hard. No one had expected the move, and everyone gasped. Nokai snapped out again, and Sagiri held the blades to the man's neck. It looked really ready for the cutting.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now?! You are an instructor and a full-fledged warrior, yet you allowed these dumb kids to come in here." Sagiri's jaw trembled.

"Sagiri!!" Nvaru called, but Sagiri was not going to calm down so easily at this time.

"Stay out of it. Can't believe my own sand shade could be this stupid either!!" Sagiri turned his head slightly and glared at Nvaru. "You disappoint me."

"You have three seconds." Sagiri snarled, and the man trembled. He didn't know who he was, but he had never felt such killing intent pressing on him.

"W-Who are you?" The man's trembling voice.

"I am the last man you are going to see," Sagiri said, his blade pressing into the instructor's neck, drawing blood.

"Please calm down, you can't kill him," Kiuga said in a small voice.

"Yes, please..." More voices said in uniform, mostly the girls.

"Who gets to pay then for this stupidity?!" Sagiri snarled in a cold voice. The blade penetrated deeper and was just a whisper away from puncturing the artery.

"Sagiri. Put the blade away." Another voice joined in. Salka. "I want to kill them too, but I will make sure they are stripped of their rank," Salka said.

Sagiri held the blade to the man's neck as everyone waited with bated breath before they snapped back and disappeared into the pocket.

"Annoying," Sagiri gritted, turning to face Salka. The man slithered away, fear still clear in his features.

Chapter 290: IN BETWEEN

Two hours had passed since the squads crawled out of the valley with squad Salka and Sagiri. Salka's squad was equipped with antidotes and healing pills. They gave everyone one healing pill, even Sagiri. He had exhausted most of his strength to carry the damned bastards. He had grown stronger, yet he still got exhausted even more quickly.

He felt like he was doing something wrong, and that is why he needed Koru now more than ever for many things. With his current amount of strength, he should have been able to go days on end, but somehow, he was almost depleted of all strength.

After taking the pill, everyone at least looked less dead and started tending their wounds. Even the unconscious instructor stirred. His leg was still very much broken, and Salka had said he would snap it back after he ate. Apparently, he and his team had come into the valley a day earlier than Sagiri.

Lotaga lit a fire while the rest of Salka's squad went to hunt. Everyone pulled close to the fire. It was in the early hours of the morning, but it was still cold near the Boni valley.

"What brought your team so far south?" Sagiri asked Lotaga when he moved across the clearing to create another fire.

"I can't possibly tell you a secret mission," Lotaga said sheepishly.

"A secret mission this close to the south. Did you leave Senraki by himself?" Sagiri said, fearing for the life of the cadets at Galka in the absence of Salka.

"Don't worry, Fuwuka is still there," Lotaga said,

"Now will you tell me what an elite squad is doing so far south, especially the captain?" Sagiri asked.

"Salka will put me on pet tending if I tell you he was tasked by the Supreme mandra to oversee order and security in the southern border," Lotaga said before he gasped.

"Why? The southern border is not causing any threat to Tagayia." Sagiri said, narrowing his eyes.

"Well, I don't know, but our captain doesn't get summoned unless it's a delicate situation. He answers only to the mandra." Lotaga said. Salka was indeed a man of many secrets and even deadlier than the shadow corp.

"What are you two whispering about?" Salka's voice reached Sagiri's side. He was carrying a dead wild deer with a snapped neck. He must have snapped it with his bare hands.

"I did not tell him anything!!" Lotaga said, jumping to his feet and acting sheepishly, giving away the fact that he had indeed said something. Sagiri shook his head in disbelief before turning to Salka.

"What is wrong with the southern border?" Sagiri asked. Salka just tossed the wild deer to the ground before he retrieved a knife and went to work.

"You will be on pet tending duty for a decade." He said after a while. Lotaga shivered and jumped behind Sagiri.

"Sagiri, tell him you are the one who forced it out of me," Lotaga began shamelessly. "You know how cruel our little Sagiri can be. He threatened to take my life." Lotaga continued, and Salka paused.

"Shut up before I gut you like this deer." Lotaga jumped even further behind Sagiri.

"The border is fine. After the fear you struck in the hearts of many. Even a ruler can be weary." Salka said, looking at Sagiri.

"They still have my parents and are weary of me?" Sagiri breathed with irritation.

"You being in the north does not help either. If word gets around, someone can use it as an excuse." Matasi said, tossing another deer on the ground beside the one Salka was gutting. Just how many deer did they hunt?

"We made a deal with the Tsaka. I haven't balanced scales with a certain someone." Sagiri said.

"You made the same deal to let your parents go, yet they still hold your parents," N'varu said from behind Sagiri.

"If Tsaka harms my parents, Tagayia will not know any peace. I did the dirt work for Taziraka and went south with Tatani. If they both go back on their word, then I won't take it lightly." Sagiri said in a cold tone.

"You are still cranky. Right now, it's not the mandra who is weary of the border. If I could guess, someone is pushing his own agenda." Kolu said.

"Someone wishes for Tagayia to go to war with the South. How daring? Does Tagayia think the south is easy for the taking?" Sagiri snickered.

Salka and Matasi continued gutting the game, while Yavaga asked the men to join them around the new fire and the girls to sit around the other with the two instructors.

There was silence as everyone joined in to roast their own meat over the fire after Salka and Matasi were done cutting it into smaller pieces. There was more silence as the smell of burning meat filled the air. After an hour of everyone burning their portion and tearing into it, Sagiri finally stood. He had not eaten much, but the pill had worked magic, and he was rejuvenated. He sprang to his feet, suddenly catching everyone's attention.

"I guess now the debt is paid. I take back my words that I will come if you need my help. If you pull another stunt like this, don't send me any message." Sagiri said in an icy voice. He wished he did not mean the words, but they needed to learn restraint and grow some brains.

There was a pause of silence as the head lowered.

"You are leaving already?" N'varu asked.

"Before you sent a message, I was on my way to Thazir, the western capital of the south. I am breaking into the city to get out of my mother's sandshade." Sagiri did not miss a beat.

"Absolutely not!! You can't break into Thazir. You will die." N'varu said, springing to his feet, eyes wide.

"I am and I will. I have been sending scouts to both Thazir and Azareen's capital, and it has taken me a year to make a map." Sagiri said, unfazed by the outburst.

"If they have him there, you know they have prisons far worse than the fourth and seventh wings of Tagayia. They will be waiting for you." N'varu said.

"Well then, I am getting him out either way. If the South wished to stop me, then I would not spare them." Sagiri said.

"You wish to declare war on your own people?" Yavaga said, chewing on another piece of meat.

"Well, I am a chief, and I am allowed in the capital. They can't deny me my seat and existence forever and still keep someone I want. The way I see it, they have declared war on me first.

"I am coming with you then," N'varu said.

"You lecture your former squad on being stupid, yet you are acting even more stupid now," Matasi said.

"This is necessary. Why not bargain with something they want first?" Kolu asked. He was slightly shrewd after his travels.

"I don't have anything to exchange. They asked me to send away Tatani and go alone to the capital. They already declared war on me." Sagiri refuted.

"You are wrong." Kiuga joined in. "You have a lot to exchange. Sounds like they allow Tatani to stay because they are scared of you."

"What are you suggesting?" Sagiri asked, turning to Kiuga. Seems his pretty brain was still working, and he was generating an answer at the moment.

"Tell me everything and anything. Even the map. Let me see." Kiuga said.

"That is not a good idea," N'varu said. "What if we stand on opposite sides in the future."

"It's bold that you think I can kill Sagiri. I will not use this information against you. I swear on mine and my clan's life." Kiuga said.

"Just how many lives does your clan have? You swear on their heads every time." Kaka snickered."

"Don't worry, anyone who dares come south, I will bury them in the desert," Sagiri said, retrieving the map.