

KEEPER 291

Chapter 291. PLANS AND FAREWELLS

What do you know about the two cities since you have to go to both?" Kiuga asked after staring at the map. "What about the security system and shifts?"

"Sagiri shook his head. The South really kept a tight lipped kin.

"They are impenetrable, unlike Alike and Ko'alsi. Everyone who enters has to speak one of the four southern languages. They have an identification of tribe and a clan identification with a chief's stamp." N'varu said, and everyone sighed.

"What are the South keeping in the cities?" Kolu shook his head.

"Well, you can't blame us after we let you come into our walls and you slaughtered an entire tribe and its thirteen clans!" N'varu snapped. Everyone went silent for a little while.

"What is he talking about?" Lotaga asked.

"Sagiri's clan, the north, slaughtered all of it, and he is the last one left." N'varu shook with rage.

"So that is the person you want to balance scales with?" Salka asked, seemingly in deep thought.

"I will balance the scales even if one breath is left in my lungs," Sagiri said. "But that is mine to do. Right now I have to go to the capital. N'varu let it go for now. We will settle the scales after this." Sagiri said, calmer than everyone had expected. Perhaps too calm.

"As far as I can see, breaking in won't get you far," Kiuga said.

"Then what do you expect me to do?"

"Walk through the front door," Kiuga said, and Sagiri's pupils dropped.

"You might still be suffering from the Boni valley stupidity," Sagiri said, but Kiuga did not seem offended.

"N'varu, you seem to know better about these cities. Will you tell me more about them?" Kiuga said.

"You expect me to tell a future Tagayia general about the south. So you can wipe out more clans..."
N'varu started.

"Tell him," Sagiri said.

"You are making the wrong decision."

"I believe everyone is a friend. Killing a friend is better than killing an enemy I don't know. Tell him,"
Sagiri insisted.

"You speak as if you have grown a decade since you went south," Lotaga said.

"You should take his example and grow up, too," Yavaga said.

"I will put you two on pet tending duty if you don't shut up." Salka snapped at his two grown kids. That is what they seemed like. "Nvaru. You can trust my squad won't say a word of this."

There was silence as all eyes fell on N'varu.

"The South survives because of Thazir and Azareen. Those two capitals make invasion almost impossible." He dragged a finger across the map that Sagiri's scouts had drawn. "This is not exactly accurate. Thazir sits in the western stone ranges. To reach it, you have to pass through canyon systems so tight that large formations can't even deploy properly. The roads twist between cliffs hundreds of feet high, and every section above those paths is fortified. Archers, artillery, kill slots carved directly into the rock. An army marching toward Thazir is exposed the entire way while the defenders remain protected inside the mountain itself. And even if someone survives that, the city walls are layered

upward into the cliffs. You don't breach Thazir in one attack. You have to climb it while being crushed from above. Simply putting it is impossible to break in, even if you have the map. You will need at least an amount of fifty thousand to make it to the city walls."

"Wow," Kolu said, licking his lips as if the information was exciting

His finger moves east to the undrawn part of the page.

"Azareen protects the eastern side of the South. The city sits beyond the deep desert of the east, and the desert is part of the defense. There are only a few stable approaches large enough for armies to cross, and the south controls every one of them. Wells are hidden or sealed. Supply routes are monitored constantly by the desert guardian. He is another deadly opponent. If an invading force loses direction out there, they die before seeing the city." He tapped the map again. "Then there's the wall system. Azareen isn't protected by one wall. It's protected by several defensive rings built across elevated ground. Every layer forces attackers into open killing fields overlooked by towers and heavy weapons. Retreat becomes difficult once you enter those layers because the paths behind you can be sealed." N'varu said proudly. No one really loved his homeland more than him.

It was clear that everyone around the fire had never heard of such information, and they were amazed.

He folded his hands and stepped back slightly.

"That's why nobody invades the South directly anymore. Even if the South tries, they will fail. They were only able to touch N'folu because they did not live in the city. They hated cities and lived up north peacefully. If Thazir breaks the armies before they can enter from the west. Azareen starves them before they can enter from the east." N'varu finished stepping back.

"I don't think breaking in is possible," Zazarie said. "That is suicide."

"Just like I thought, the south is like an onion or like nvaru. full of secrets but never talking about them. Sagiri, you will have to walk through the front gate. They are scared of you but have not made a deal. If you pretend that you are on their side or strike a deal, then you can have the man you seek without getting hurt. Once we get inside the city, I will help you come up with another plan." Kiuga said.

"What do you mean by 'we'?"

"You said I'll become a general. I have to make sure you don't die. We have two more weeks before the merit collecting exercise comes to an end. I will come with you." Kiuga said.

"These kids!" Salka said, but did not make a move to stop Kiuga.

"I am coming too, then," Kaka said, looking away slightly.

"I can't let an Asakana out-merit me. I am coming." Maita said, and Banga nodded. It was the same old same ole. Had they not learned anything?

The chain went on until everyone was in.

"I guess I am coming too," Lotaga said, and Salka split his head in half.

"I can turn a blind eye to the warrior initiates, but you are always with me. You can't act recklessly."

Hold up. I did say you can come with me. Has everyone gone mad?!" Sagiri snapped. "If I am going through the front gate alone, then I go alone."

"When they asked you to go alone, they by all means did not mean for you to show up alone. We ten can be considered not a threat." Kiuga said, standing up. "I can't rest for a day, even before I have to lead another suicide mission. Perhaps they should call me the suicide mission strategist in the future."

"I have not agreed..."

"We have to prepare, then we can't go looking like this," Nvaru said.

"We can pass for Tatani. It's good that you went with them south." Bukata said.

They were all ignoring Sagiri as if they could not hear whatever he was saying.

Damnes squad 25, he had almost forgotten how persistent they could be.

"I did not hear any of this conversation. You have to be back before the two weeks elapse. I almost thought you were going to let your squadmate make a stupid decision alone. I don't know if I am more proud that you are acting like a team or disappointed that you have to do everything suicidal." Salka said, getting up and turning to his squad. " We are behind schedule by a day. We should get moving back." He said.

He turned to look at Sagiri.

"Good to see you again, kid. Now think twice before you do anything." Is all he said before he turned around, and the four with him followed after saying their farewells.

Well, they did not leave before Lotaga squeezed him into another crushing hug that had Kaka looking nauseated. Salka had to turn back and pull him away before the five disappeared.

Chapter 292. INTO THE SOUTH

"You all can come out. It is me." Sagiri said, breaking through the Tatani defence lines. He knew very well the men hiding in perfect camouflage in the dunes. To an outsider, they could seem perfect, but he knew their positions and didn't even have to listen to their heartbeats.

Tinka stepped out with a dozen men crawling out beside him. Sagiri's squad caught up just as quickly. They left the outskirts of Boni soon after Sagiri, and they ate. They told the ladies they were going on ahead to see sagiri off at the border. After Gavina promised to challenge him again, the two teams finally separated, or at least that is what they thought until they reached the border, and sagiri called for someone who had been following them to come out.

Just like on the Tatani mission, Lira must have followed. Well, she was not in the Kafika 1 squad, so it was only natural that she could make an independent decision.

"Must you follow me everywhere?" Sagiri asked.

"I want to help to repay my debt." She said as if that explained it all, and sagiri sighed and kneaded his eyebrows.

"You already paid for the Tatani mission. Consider us even. Now, can you go back?" Sagiri asked, and the girl did not even act like she was leaving, she said.

"No."

A solid no.

"Do you wish to die or something?" Sagiri asked, and Lira shook her head.

"I have to come with you." She said, and everyone sighed.

"Why?" Sagiri asked.

Deep down, he knew why. Well, he thought he knew. Lira was the other reason he needed koru. She had something she was not supposed to, and it made Sagiri uneasy. He still felt like they were opposites, yet she had protected him, and then he had seen it. The masters of whispers helped make a tent from branches back then. He went to check on Lira when she woke up while the master of whispers was changing her bandages to her. Well, she was not completely naked, but he had seen something on her.

"What is that?!" Sagiri gritted those three words as if they pained him. He crossed the distance in a second. His hand was wrapped around Lira in a vice grip, preventing her from covering her top body.

"What?" she panicked, all shreds of embarrassment leaving her body like in a flash. Well, she had learnt that men and women should not see or touch each other unless married, but it did not look like sagiri was being perverted, but pissed. Her eyes snapped down to see what she was being held prisoner for, as the hairs on her back stood in fear. She now knew better than to get on the wrong side of Sagiri. His voice was nothing short of a threat, as if she were hiding something.

Right where the assassin had cut her, and another had kicked her skin had turned an ugly dark purple. But I knew that was not what he was talking about. In between the purple, a harsher shape was taking shape. What appeared to be some sort of incomplete talons and claws was taking shape harshly in the purple.

"I don't know, I have never seen that in my life, I wasn't born with it, maybe the assassins broke something," she panicked, staring at the two sheets of purple while her hands trembled. She looked up at Sagiri, and his eyes were burning into the bruise. The flames in his pupils burned harder, almost molting into lava. Danger lay in those eyes. Sagiri could feel no lies coming from her, and her heartbeat was stable. He could also perceive her fear.

The tattoo or marking or whatever was on her body scratched a certain part of Sagiri's memory, but he could not quite put a finger on it. An uneasy feeling he could not quite get rid of. Sagiri, however, quickly realized his mistake and unhand her. With trembling hands, she pulled her upper shirt down over her wound. Only then did he snap his eyes back to his normal flames. The tattoo disappeared and reappeared again and again, and Sagiri could not look away easily, as if he wanted some answers. blinked a couple of times before shutting them for a second. He took a step from the bed and turned around, his back rigid.

"Forgive my indecency." Is all he said in a curt voice. He didn't turn around once as he left through the door.

"What just happened?!" he could hear her wonder even as he walked away.

"What a domineering suitor." The woman nursing her cheered, clearly misunderstanding the whole exchange. "You should tell your parents to prepare Kaliwa."

"Let's make sure you are as straight as an arrow for your wedding," she added.

"I don't have anywhere else to go." She answered, looking a bit sad at Sagiri. Well, she could go back to the war school academy. Sagiri understood she did not have a home, but was she really going to use that when she could go back to college? Was she learning the art of emotional manipulation?

"Fine, suit yourself. Just don't get in my way." Sagiri sighed, giving in.

Her earlier sad facade dropped, or was it genuine? She smiled from ear to ear and ran up to Sagiri, looking as if she had earned some victory.

"Really?" She twirled a braid of her hair.

"Only this once. Don't make me regret it." Sagiri said, but he knew he felt pity for her somehow. She was just a lost girl raised in a lab with no clan, family, or friends.

She squealed loudly and jumped around, causing everyone to cover their ears. Sagiri's squad had been watching the exchange happen, and they clearly did not know what to say. They had tried to ignore and avoid the girl, but she was unavoidable.

Without wasting time, Sagiri had led the squad into the south into the barren lands and leading into the outskirts of the new Tatani village. The journey took a whole day and half the night at full speed to finally touch the outskirts of New Tatani.

"Wait here. I need to talk to my fighters. Join me when they step out." Sagiri said before going ahead.

"Your fighters?" Kiuga taunted.

"You are finally acting like a chief," Kaka said in uproar.

"I am not their chief. I am just responsible for them for now." Sagiri tried to defend himself, but he could tell there was no convincing anyone.

"Whatever. Don't move until they come out." Sagiri said before covering the remaining distance to a huge dune.

Chapter 293. NEW TATANI

"You are back from your seclusion?" Tinka asked.

"You can say that. I need you to go back to the village and bring me nine men and one female outfit made for the desert, covering every inch of the body. Bring water and food too.

"If I may ask the chief, who are they for?" Tinka asked. He was still so curious and a pain in the neck.

"They are for my friends who have come to visit me from the north," Sagiri said.

"Yes, we missed our dear sagiri and came to see if you, of Tatani, have been treating him kindly," Kiuga said from behind Sagiri, throwing a hand around his neck, even though they were now almost the same height and build, but Sagiri was an inch shorter.

"We could never harm the chief!" Tinka defended immediately.

"Well, I don't trust you. I had to come see it for myself." Kiuga taunted.

"What reason do we have to harm him? He is our chief now." Tinka was getting pulled into the Kiuga bullshit.

"Don't listen to him, Tinka. Kiuga, stop teasing my general. Please bring a change of clothes now. I can't have them walking around like this. Also, this is a secret. Don't tell anyone, even Seya. I will tell her when I send them back." Sagiri said

"Seya ... Seya went to find someone with Nonaki. I am the only one left." Tinka said sheepishly. "She said she'd be back soon," Tinka explained. It was clear Seya had not told her where she was going, but Sagiri already knew she had gone to find the iron matron.

"I see. You are doing a great job." Sagiri said. Tinka was a bit fearful, and, with all three of the top ones away, he left alone. He must have been scared, having to hold the fort afloat all by himself. It was clear he was happy to see Sagiri.

"Thank you, Chief." He bowed.

"Now go and get me what I asked for. Get everyone a change of clothes," he said plainly. "Something fit for the south." Then, after a brief pause, his eyes shifted toward the girl. "Her too." Tinka nodded once and disappeared into the silent lower settlement.

Sagiri knew the village was asleep, but he could not afford to walk with strangers into the new tatani.

"Yes, chief," Tinka said before he and his eleven men disappeared into the desert.

"Wow, Sagiri, the blind, you sound like a chief now. Go do this... Go do that..." Ulekai cheered his eyes wide.

"He is a chief," Kaka said, glaring at Ulekai, who immediately jumped behind Sagiri. They had been on the same squad for almost two years, and the boy was still very much scared of Kaka.

"I wish I could be a chief too," Kiuga said.

"How cruel a fate that would be for the Lofekeni. What a cruel fate." Kaka spat.

"A cruel fate is you being the next chief of the Bami Tribe and being the grand zorath of the north, such a tragedy," Kiuga said.

"Why would it be a tragedy?"

"The next chief of Bami will be a Chimera," Maita said.

"Yet none of you can beat an Asakana in a fight." Kaka sneered. The normal bickering went on and on.

"A tragedy is if any of you gets a high position. Quit squabbling like kids, you will wake the desert scorpions." Sagiri said, and everyone stilled like rocks. Lira clung to his side. Sagiri was not expecting the female to press on him, and he snapped his eyes to look down at her clinging to his arm.

"Lira, you realize this is not appropriate," Sagiri said. Lira paused before a scream tore from her throat, and she jumped away, her cheeks flushing.

"You still don't know anything about women, I see." Kiuga sighed in disappointment.

Soon after, Tinka and his men brought the garments. Sagiri asked Lira to go change behind a rock, and the men behind the dune, Tinka and his men, had been camouflaged earlier. After everyone was set and they had put away their war college combat suits in their war-equipped bags, they all finally moved into the village.

"You can relax. I am here now." Sagiri said before leading the squad into the new Tatani village.

"Yes, chief."

"You built this in a year!" N'varu gasped and walked quickly. Sagiri could have been imagining it, but the man was fast in the desert. It looked like he was gliding on wheels instead of walking. The village was nothing much, but Seya had done a great job.

The rebuilt settlement rose directly from the desert stone itself, massive structures carved into cliffs and half-buried rock formations, while other homes seemed shaped from hardened sand smoothed by years of heat and wind. Narrow walkways curved between towering sandstone walls lit by hanging lanterns that burned low against the dark. Bridges of carved stone connected higher sections of the settlement overhead, while long fabrics hung between structures to block the harsher desert winds. The deeper they walked, the more beautiful the village became

Eventually, they reached the chief's residence near the upper section of the settlement. Unlike the other structures, the house wasn't built onto the stone. It had been carved directly into it. The entrance curved inward through smooth black rock etched with old Tatani markings worn down by time and sand. Inside, the air felt cooler immediately. Wide chambers opened beneath naturally formed stone ceilings supported by carved pillars, the walls lined with woven cloth, hanging lanterns, and low-burning fire pits that painted the rooms in warm amber light.

Food was brought soon after they entered. Large trays of roasted crabs and heavy bowls of desert broth were placed across the long stone table while water and dark southern tea followed after. Nobody spoke much once the eating started. They were too exhausted for conversation. One by one, the tension that had followed them through Boni and the southern roads slowly faded beneath warmth, food, and

shelter. Eventually, even the quieter voices disappeared entirely as the group settled into the stone chambers for the night, the desert winds whispering faintly outside the carved walls of Tatani.

"Lira, come with me," Sagiri said as the men started falling asleep carelessly on the floor. Kiuga and Ulekai had already taken his whole bed, built from stone.

Lira followed silently, and Sagiri led her into another house beside his. Seya's house. It was a blessing she was not here.

"You sleep here. Don't come out until I come to pick you." Sagiri walked out soon after. He did not join the men, but jumped to the roof of his tall, chiefly structured structure and sat in a meditative position. Conscious meditative slumber would rejuvenate him quickly, and that is what he did. He also needed to calm his mind as hard as possible.

Chapter 294. SLEEP AND MORE SLEEP

The squads did not stir even when dawn came, and Sagiri did not stir for a long time until the sun rose, and he finally stirred. He needed to circle the perimeter and check as far out as he could, like always.

He jumped down from the stone roof just as the sun started to peek from behind the horizon. The sun in this place was an enemy. Having grown up in the east and spending time in the northern pentagons for a year, he had never seen such relentless sun, and it took him a while to adapt. Same to the Tatani. They had been living underground for a decade or two, and some had passed away in the early days from heat stroke. save to say they all had to build shelters quickly.

"Good morning, chief?" A group of women going to the only well-greeted. It had taken a month to build the well Nokai had dug and dug and dug for days before touching the water table that was a million feet underground.

Sagiri nodded to them. He was still covered like always, and it is safe to say not many, even in Tatani, knew his face. Just his mismatched eyes. Well, and his foreboding presence. He, however, had not been able to fully merge with the people. Yes, they respected him, and he joined in festivities, but deep in his heart, he still wanted to go to his own tribe. Former tribe ruins to say goodbye to them and see for himself what remained.

The morning patrol did not take long, and it always took Sagiri just an hour or two. One, when he was feeling at ease, but two, like today, when he knew Seya and Ninoka were away. He got back just as the sun began to get hotter.

Food had been served in his chamber. He assumed Tinka had put someone on the duty, yet it remained untouched. The boys were sleeping, and from the steady heartbeat coming from Seya's house, Lira was still dead asleep too. The desert clothes the squad now wore were warm, meant to protect night travelers in the cold of the night in the desert, and even with most of them sleeping on the floor, they were dead asleep.

The room was full of snoring matters from time to time, but it was safe to say they were out cold and would be for a long time. Well, after being stuck in Bono Valley for up to nine days without proper sleep and scared for their life, it was safe to say they had not slept well. Then they travelled south with him immediately after. It is safe to say they needed a week's worth of sleep.

Even Ulekai had one foot resting on Kaka's arm, which showed how deeply even Kaka was sleeping. It would be funny if they woke up in the same position.

The inside of the house was cool, especially since it was made of stone, which made it quite comfortable to sleep in at any time of the day.

How could they be out cold in enemy territory without a care? Sagiri wondered. They could even sleep like this in the south. How careless. If word got out that a northerner was in the south, they would be sought after and killed, yet they had offered to go with him to the heart of the south.

How careless indeed.

He was beginning to think they got more careless whenever they knew he was around. Kiuga, more so, could cuddle an enemy. Somehow, it made his heart feel warm. He looked at them sprawled for another second longer before he moved out. He did not wish to travel during the day anyway.

He sat just outside the room door and went to sleep himself. It almost felt like he was protecting them by sleeping outside, yet even he was out cold afterwards.

He snapped awake out of habit at midday. It was about the time he trained the fighters in using the spear and hand combat, just like he was taught in the Galka war academy. He even taught them how to

use small blades sometimes. They were not badly off, but their means of fighting needed to be elevated. Sagiri was now fully rested. Lunch had been dropped by and the breakfast taken away, but still it remained untouched. Sagiri helped himself after stretching.

Still, the squad was not up.

Sagiri changed into his training light fabric garments before he stepped out. He met up with Tinka just at the doorstep.

"I was just coming to tell you the fighters are gathered," Tinka said.

"I was on my way there. Join me." Sagir said, and Tinka nodded.

They both headed for the training grounds where fighters ranging from young boys to adult males were sparring in hand combat.

"Get in line!" Tinka said. He was the general after all, and Sagiri wanted to turn the Tatani fighters from just fighters to warriors and deadly ones at that. He might not be able to protect them for long, and he needed them to stand on their own feet and not depend on him like squad 25.

Sagiri walked ahead and stood at the front of the now-thin lines.

"Tatani warriors in line! CREED!!" Sagiri announced

"Tatani belongs anywhere we choose! Anyone who denies is an enemy!!" They sang in chorus.

Seya was extreme in her creed, but Sagiri was not completely against it. Well, even the first man to settle in Tagayia or Tatani did not ask permission. People just get selfish when they settle first, thinking that they have the right to live more than anyone else.

"second creed!!"

"We live in peace unless provoked. We fight not to kill but to protect ourselves!" They sang again in chorus. He had taught them this second one. If it were up to him, he wished they had never had to fight and live peacefully, but well, if only wishes were horses.

"Hand combat! Position one!" Sagiri announced, and everyone fell into a stance.

The training began. From stances to offensive moves to defence to sparring." It took around three hours, as usual, before it was men's time to go to the baths they had carved from stone. deep under a huge stone at the edge of the village.

Sagiri bathes alone before everyone. Maybe because he was the chief, or because no one dared shower with him. Either way, he loved these moments when he sat in the bath alone for a few minutes. And that's what he did before he headed to his house. It was now almost 5 pm. Sagiri walked to his house, hoping to find the guys awake, but they were still very much asleep. They had not even stirred.

Just how tired were they?

Were they dead or asleep? He let them sleep another two hours while he did a lot of nothing but sitting around before he woke them up.

They had the guts to jump up and act as if they had been startled from a two-hour nap instead of a century of sleep.

"What is happening?!" Kiuga gasped, looking like he did not remember where, what, or who he was. Even hoping he remembered his name was far-fetched.

"Where are we?!" Ulekai jumped up, looking fearful.

"So much for you helping me go to the capital when all you have done is sleep for a week," Sagiri said, turning around to the eating place attached to his room.

Chapter 295. JOURNEY TO THAZIR

Rushed footsteps followed after Sagiri just as he sat down, ready to eat.

"What time is it?" It was N'varu. He looked just as disoriented as everyone else.

"It should almost be eight now," Sagiri said

"Eight... in the morning?" Kiuga asked as if hoping the darkness outside was a bad dream. Sagiri shook his head as the guys swarmed the table.

"Eight! At night! Which day?!" Kaka said as if his honour depended on it.

"You slept the whole night and day." Sagiri sighed.

"Why didn't you wake us up?" N'varu said in an accusing tone.

"Why did you let us sleep for so long?" Maita joined in. How ridiculous for them to blame him for letting them sleep.

"I just woke you now," Sagiri said. "You all look like you could not mind sleeping till morning anyway."

"I feel so rested." Kiuga yawned, joining the table last. Well, the stone table. "But Sagiri, you should have woken me up sooner. Why didn't you? Don't tell me I looked too beautiful while sleeping, you couldn't bear to do it."

"You did. A little." Sagiri said, and everyone froze in uniform, even Kiuga. They looked at him as if he had grown another head before they all burst out laughing.

"Kiuga, what have you done? You have ruined him." Zazarie said, shaking his head.

"You should go to the baths now that I am sure the men are done, then come and eat, we leave for the capital tonight. We should cover as much distance as we can at night." Sagiri said after they were done laughing, getting straight to business.

An hour later, the squad had eaten and bathed, and they looked less confused. They jumped into business right away. Kiuga's strategy was bargaining. Most likely, they could want to control him or use him, and he should try to bargain. There was a risk of them wanting to eliminate him, but all they needed was for him to buy time so they could spy if they could.

"So buying time is all we need first," Sagiri said.

"Not necessarily. We have to see the reception first. If they try to kill you on the spot, then I am afraid that making them scared of you will hasten the process, and then we will circle back to buying time. We are there to get someone out after all, so we have to play it safe. For now, they have something you want, and you don't have anything they want. So all you have to do is take something of theirs?" Kiuga said.

Sagiri could understand what he meant, but it is easier said than done.

"What could they possibly want. Our Sagiri is poor." Ulekai said, and everyone groaned, even Kaka.

"We will make plans at every step, but remember we have two weeks to get in and out. They have time, while you don't. We must get inside the gates of the capital as soon as possible. The sooner the better." Kiuga said.

"Looks like all odds are in my favor," Sagiri said, sighing. "Well, whatever it takes, I am getting him out."

"Well, if push comes to shove, I expect you to apply pressure in the way you do best. But we don't pull that card until it's necessary." Kiuga said.

Tinka and his men had brought in dried crab meat. And water skin flasks meant for the desert. The desert caps were also included.

"This should be our last mission, I suppose." Sagiri found himself saying.

"You said that last time. You should quit before I break you in half." Kaka threatened.

Sagiri sighed. It was better that he stopped saying anything. It could seem that destiny had another plan that did not match his.

They left New Tatani after nightfall, moving south beneath a sky drowned in stars while cold desert wind rolled endlessly across the dunes. The squad traveled at full speed from the moment they cleared the outer settlements, bodies cutting through the darkness in long controlled strides that barely disturbed the sand beneath them. Cloaks snapped violently behind them while moonlight flashed across stone ridges and shifting dunes as they crossed the open desert without slowing. Sagiri remained at the front, masked and silent, his pace relentless enough that the others were forced to maintain complete focus to keep formation behind him.

But even among them, N'varu moved differently.

The desert seemed to belong to him.

He crossed the dunes with frightening smoothness, his body leaning low as he accelerated over unstable ground that should have slowed anyone else. Sand barely held beneath his feet before he pushed off again, leaving no trails behind as he moved. Sometimes he disappeared completely into the dark stretches between dunes only to emerge far ahead seconds later like a shadow pulled across the desert itself. The farther they moved from Tatani, the faster N'varu became. He stopped running through the desert and began moving with it, gliding along descending dunes, launching across stone outcrops, then cutting sharply through valleys of black rock without ever losing momentum.

At one point, he surged so far ahead that the others almost lost sight of him entirely. All they could see was sand erupting along the desert surface in rapid bursts beneath the moonlight as he crossed impossible distances at terrifying speed. Even Sagiri glanced toward him briefly beneath the mask. N'varu has a Sand Shade for a reason. In the open desert, few people alive could match him once he fully released his movement.

He was strong in the south, just like Sagiri. Sagiri had never seen him move like that. His movements looked so free and effortless.

Sagiri shot forward to catch up with him and slow him down. He had never seen N'varu so free.

"You move quite like the desert winds..." Sagiri said, catching up. He stopped midway at the smile on N'varu's face. After a moment, Sagiri looked away. He knew he was the reason N'varu moved north, yet he had denied him the right to come south with him for a whole year. Now seeing how free he was made him feel guilty.

If the mission went well, he would allow N'varu and the others to come south if they wished. He would leave the choice entirely up to them. They still had another year in war college, but they did not have to continue staying in the north and be his future spies if they did not wish it.

"You need to slow down, or we will lose the others," Sagiri said. Indeed, N'varu was untouchable in the sand of the desert.

The journey toward Thazir Capital continued deep into the night, the squad crossing enormous stretches of southern wasteland. They would hit the first civilization by evening the following day if all went well.

Chapter 296. THE RECEPTION

By following the map, the spies had been able to bring back Sagiri, and the squad was able to avoid all checkpoints. They now stood at the edge of the capital city of Thazir. It was just after nightfall, but the place almost looked abandoned, as if people rarely went and even rarely came out.

"The city is a whole country by itself. In case of a war, the two capitals can sustain the people of the south for up to five years." N'varu said with pride.

"How amazing," Kaka said. "A siege will seem like a normal day, and the enemy will only tire for five years."

Even so, there were caravans pulling in and out, and a few people.

The capital was built directly into the mountains.

Layers of stone structures climbed the cliffs in enormous tiers lit by thousands of scattered fires and lanterns that burned against the dark rock like veins of gold. Massive walls curved through the canyon

entrances below the city, while fortress towers stood high above them, carved directly into the cliff faces. From the outskirts alone, the scale of the defenses felt suffocating. Narrow canyon roads twisted toward the capital between towering walls of black stone, every path overlooked by elevated fortifications built into the mountainside itself. Archways crossed overhead between sections of the cliffs while rows of defensive openings lined the rock above the roads, dark enough that nobody could tell how many soldiers were watching from inside them.

Even the outskirts were fortified.

Watchfires burned along the upper ridges stretching for miles across the mountains while heavily armored gates blocked each canyon approach in layered sections. The deeper one looked toward Thazir, the more impossible the city appeared to assault. It did not feel like a capital built for people.

It felt like a fortress built for war first and civilization second.

Sagiri slowed slightly as the squad reached one of the outer stone ridges overlooking the approach roads. Wind moved through the canyon systems below them, carrying distant echoes of movement from the capital while lights flickered endlessly across the mountain city ahead. Beside him, even some of the squad had gone quiet, looking at it.

Because now that they stood before Thazir directly, they finally understood why no army had ever taken it.

"Abort plan. I think we are all going to die." Kiuga joked with a sigh, but it was looking more than real for anyone to laugh.

"Let's go," Sagiri said.

"Can't we wait a bit?" Ulekai said.

"You can wait for us here," Kiuga said. Ulekai jumped quickly and was at the centre of the formation.

Sagiri stepped onto the canyon road first, the rest of the squad following behind him as they began descending into the western passage leading toward Thazir. The deeper they moved, the narrower the path became. Towering walls of black stone rose on both sides high enough to swallow most of the night sky, leaving only a thin strip of stars visible far above them. Their footsteps echoed through the canyon in low, repeating sounds while cold wind moved through the passage carrying dust and the distant scent of burning firewood from the capital ahead.

The scale of the defenses became clearer the farther they walked.

Massive fortified structures had been carved directly into the cliffs overlooking the road above them, narrow defensive openings cut into the stone at different heights where unseen eyes watched every movement below. Thick iron gates stood further ahead across sections of the canyon, each one large enough to stop entire military formations, while smaller side paths branched upward into hidden positions within the mountains themselves. Bridges crossed overhead between cliffs, guarded by armed silhouettes standing motionless against the firelight.

Nobody in the squad spoke much while moving through the canyon. The place itself forced silence. Every step deeper into Thazir felt controlled, observed, and measured by defenses in the shadows.

They barely made it halfway through the final canyon before the command came.

"Stop there."

The voice thundered down from above the cliffs, sharp enough to halt the entire formation instantly. Sagiri's squad stopped in the middle of the stone passage while heavy metallic sounds echoed around them. Then the canyon changed.

Defensive shutters slid open high within the cliffs.

Rows of hidden openings appeared in the black stone walls overlooking the road, revealing armored soldiers already aiming downward. More figures emerged along the overhead bridges and elevated fortifications, weapons locking into position with practiced precision until the entire canyon felt covered from every angle.

They had walked into a kill zone. Nobody made it past this point unchecked.

A heavily armored figure stepped forward above the canyon wall overlooking them, his silhouette lit by the fire braziers behind him.

"Identify yourselves," he ordered coldly. "Now."

The squad remained still.

Wind moved through the canyon, carrying dust between both sides, while dozens of weapons stayed trained directly at them.

Then one of the soldiers above suddenly stiffened.

His eyes locked onto Sagiri.

"We are all going to die," Ulekai shuddered. For this, he was right to be scared, the thazir

The atmosphere shifted almost immediately after that.

"Remove the mask," another voice shouted from above. Harsher this time.

Several more soldiers repositioned along the cliffs.

Sagiri didn't move. He was feeling oddly calm. The tension rose in the few minutes. The way the defenders had stopped looking at the group and started focusing only on Sagiri himself. Hands slowly drifted closer to weapons across both sides of the canyon. They must have heard about him, or they knew he was always covered.

"You are armed inside the Thazir approach," the commander warned. "State your identity before this escalates further." He was referring to the small blades the others carried.

The canyon had gone completely silent now.

One wrong movement and they would have an excuse to fire. Sagiri, however, knew they would not fire so easily. Only Sagiri and N'varu could understand the southern dialect. They were speaking the southern common dialect, the Savaik tongue picked from all four tribes of the south. It is slow and sharp at the same time.

"You invite me, and then you stop me. How rude!" Sagiri said loud enough for them to hear.

"What are they saying?" Kiuga asked.

"They are inviting us with open arms, and I was saying thank you," Sagiri said, and everyone groaned.

"It sounded like a threat!" Ulekai said.

"Well, no shit!" Maita said.

"I am going to need to see your identification, or you have to turn back now!!" the voice, hauling instructions said.

"What if we refuse?" Sagiri said in a cold voice.

"I will give you only one chance to turn around!!" The voice announced again.

Sigh

He is indeed the type to be relentless.

"Is this how Thazir welcomes the chief of the N'Folu tribe?" Sagiri finally lifted his face, opened his eyes, staring especially at the man in charge.

Silence.

Chapter 297. A CHOICE

The canyon went still.

Several soldiers visibly reacted at the name alone, eyes narrowing as murmurs spread across the upper defenses. The commander's expression hardened immediately, though uncertainty flickered across it just as fast. His gaze dropped again toward Sagiri's side before returning upward to the figures standing beside him in the canyon below.

"A chief of the N'folu? N'folu doesn't have a chief," the man answered sharply.

Sagiri tilted his head slightly.

"And yet," he said, "here I am standing in front of you."

"A rogue masquerading as king. An outsider claiming to be the chief!! You won't be the first," The man snickered. It seemed there had been many masquerading as him, yet that still did not give the man the right to doubt him.

"You are not qualified to question me. Now inform the council that I am finally here, and I am not a patient man."

Above them, more movement spread through the fortifications as soldiers exchanged uneasy looks. Hands stayed on weapons, but the certainty from earlier had weakened. Because if the man below truly was N'folu, then they would not take him lightly.

"You are the one not qualified to stand and lie on the name of an honourable tribe." The man insisted. His voice carried a hint of controlled anger and scorn.

Sagiri's eyes lifted slightly beneath the mask, cold now.

"You think I would lie about carrying N'folu blood in my veins?" He asked quietly.

"You are not qualified to even speak that name carelessly." The man sneered. The pressure in the canyon changed instantly. Several soldiers tightened their grip on their weapons while the commander's expression darkened above the gate. "Careful how you speak here," the man warned.

Sagiri lost patience.

"Nokai!"

The blade answered before the word fully left his mouth.

A violent flash split through the canyon as Nokai burst from the archive pocket. The sound was sharp enough to silence the entire passage in an instant. Light carved across the darkness as the blade crossed the distance between them faster than the eye could follow, deadly intent flooding the canyon so heavily that several soldiers visibly froze where they stood. Just as fast as the blade moved, it stopped.

Stillness.

Nokai stopped a whisper from the commander's face. The edge hovered so close to his skin that the man could feel the cold pressure of the blade against him without being touched. One more inch

Nobody moved.

Even the men beside him froze. It was clear they had never seen such a blade.

The canyon became deathly silent beneath the glow of Nokai hanging in the air before the man in charge's face, its edge humming faintly in the night while Sagiri stood motionless far below with one hand still lowered at his side.

"You were saying?" Sagiri asked calmly.

"I thought you said the welcome was warm," Kiuga said, behind Sagiri.

"Looks warm to me," N'varu said.

The shock lasted only a second. Then the canyon erupted. A command came from somewhere else.

"FIRE!"

The command roared across the cliffs, and the defenses of Thazir answered instantly. Massive launch canons built into the canyon walls released with deafening force while rows of archers above the fortifications unleashed at the same time, turning the night sky black with arrows. Hundreds tore downward into the canyon in violent waves, their metal tips glinting beneath the firelight as they screamed toward Sagiri's squad from every direction.

Unlike the last time, the squad did not look fazed this time, and Kiuga yawned.

"I wonder why everyone even provokes him. People never learn," he said

The Archive reacted violently to the attack, and Zaira finally stirred and opened its eyes.

Pressure exploded outward from Sagiri so violently that the ground beneath him cracked apart. Dark currents burst through the canyon air in twisting waves while his coat snapped sharply behind him with the force. Several members of the squad staggered from the sudden force as the Archive expanded around them like a storm.

Sagiri stepped forward and thrust one hand outward.

Everything stopped. The arrows froze mid-air.

Hundreds of them.

The entire rain halted only feet from the squad, suspended across the canyon in impossible stillness while the air trembled violently around Sagiri's outstretched hand. Arrows hung above them, beside them, directly before their faces, their momentum completely crushed by the pressure flooding from the Archive. Even the heavier bolts launched from the canyon canons groaned against the force holding them motionless in the air.

Silence slammed into the place.

The soldiers above stared down in horror when the arrows started moving again, again.

Slowly at first. Then all at once, every suspended projectile turned in the air. metal tips rotating away from Sagiri's squad and back toward the canyon defenses above.

Sagiri raised his second hand and pushed them out, not enough to hit the target, but to stop inches from everyone standing above the canyons.

The arrows remained suspended above the canyon like a frozen storm, hundreds of steel points hanging motionless in the night while the Archive trembled violently around Sagiri. Dust and loose stone lifted from the ground beneath the pressure pouring from him, dark currents twisting through the air around his outstretched hands. Above the cliffs, nobody moved. Nobody even seemed to breathe.

Sagiri slowly looked up toward the man in charge, or the commander of the gate.

"You have ten minutes," he said coldly. His voice carried through the entire canyon.

"Ten minutes to get permission to open those gates."

The suspended arrows began vibrating faintly in the air.

"Or I, Sagiri... son of the South..." His eyes hardened, and the right one glowed violently

"Chief and last of N'folu..." The pressure intensified sharply enough that cracks spread through sections of the canyon walls.

"...will kill everyone in this canyon and enter Thazir by force." Sagiri finished in a growl, his anger carrying forward. How dare they dare to even stop him for over a year, as if he did not have the right?

Silence followed immediately after. Absolute silence. Because nobody above the canyon thought he was bluffing anymore.

"Now, commander... of course, if you want to die right now, my blade will not hesitate. Your men can join you, and I will still tear the gates and go in anyway. But I am an honorable man, you see. I only wish to honour my invitation. What will it be?" Sagiri said.

He did not plan to kill Southerners. yet. So it was up to how eager they were to die.

"You grow cruel each day," Kiuga said. "At least act like you mean it."

"I do mean it." Sagiri taunted.

Chapter 298. THE END OF N'GARU

"You have three minutes and twenty-two seconds," Sagiri announced after a while. "Then your men will start dying," Sagiri said, and the commander's eyes widened.

He had already heard the man ask one of his juniors behind him to run to the council and tell them the situation, but he needed to apply pressure.

"So N'varu, you said that there are six wandering members of the southern council under an elder. Prince of Tides, iron matron, veiled speaker, archivist, beast-warden, and hawkeye judge who are rarely within the walls of the capitals?"

Kiuga asked again.

"Yes. They are rarely in the city because they do business outside the city and between the two cities. There are chances they are not here, or there could be one or two." N'varu said. "They won't, however, involve themselves directly in this conflict either. Not that they are selfish, but that is just how it is. They are the backbone of N'garu. It is no longer N'garu because the N'folu is the number four N'garu. No one has said the name, and for now.

"Why did the South stop being called Ngaru?" Sagiri asked

"In the old southern tongue, N'garu means the number four. The name came from the first four tribes that crossed the burning lands and settled between the western stone ranges and the eastern deserts. They were not united by blood or language but by survival. The old records say they arrived separately and fought separately until they realized none of them would survive the South alone. So the four made an oath and became N'garu. Not one person. Not one throne. Four. itself.

"For generations, they called themselves this proudly. To belong to N'garu meant something greater than tribe. It meant you stood among the Four. N'garu, the four winds of the south. Then the N'folu disappeared.... They were the fourth tribe of the south, and the one who had refused war first. They were the pride of the south, and even with their gifts, they still stayed peaceful. Even being the least warring and peaceful, they are the first of N'garu, and without them, N'garu would have died naturally.

"Even now, the three tribes are always at each other's throats, and cold wars go on even with the facade of peace. After N'folu disappeared. Well, when the N'folu died, the South could no longer be called N'garu. Ngaru died with N'folu. So now the south is called N'Faya."

"Wow, so now the south can go back to Ngaru. I did not know N'folu is the N'garu of the south?" Kiuga said.

"Not likely. But we will see." Nvaru said

"So, who among the ruling council of the south do you think is here?" Sagiri asked.

"We have the Kai, the general of war of all the south, General Zafaru. He always stays within Thazir, mostly together with the city lord of Thazir, and leaves Azareen to the city lord of Azareen. The two city lords are the fourteenth and fifteenth members of the ruling council. The three both protect the capitals, only that the kai protects the whole state of the He is known for his regret for not being able to protect the N'folu. So he is the most likely person to be your ally. Well, that is if he doesn't kill you first because he thinks you are masquerading."

"I see. I can expect the city lord of Thazir and the kai to be here?" Sagiri asked. His luck just kept getting worse.

"Yes"

"Who else?"

"Well, the chiefs of the four tribes almost always live in the inner city of the two capitals. The Mazuku chief, who should be your worst enemy, should be here. And the Azuvai tribe chief should be here. They are masters of manipulating sound and vibrations, so be careful of those. Since you hear too much, I don't trust them not to start anything.

"The supreme chief. The ruler of the south and the chair of the ruling council presiding over the ruling council and their councils almost always stay in Thazir and rarely go to Azareen.

"We should have started with Azareen. Why did we pick the most painful city in the neck to get into?" Zazaris sighed.

"Well, what is the best place to hide a man wanted by all councils at the moment to hold over the head of sagiri?" N'varu said.

"So what is your tribe?" Bukata asked the question they had all been wanting to ask, even though Sagiri N'varu had never told him his tribe.

"I don't have a tribe." He said simply.

"Ridiculous!" Sagiri said the arrows that were suspended were shaking a little, causing those they held prisoner to freeze a little.

"Well, not that I was not born into one. I am of the third tribe of the south, the Tavhiri. of the Shaa'meri clan. From our clan, the Neni family line or subclan chose was the closest to the N'folu. Well, the keepers. It is said that the head of our family centuries ago was friends with the N'folu, especially sagiri's clan, and the keepers did not want to fight. Well, that is a story for another day. Our clan's sole purpose is to protect the keepers and make sure they never have to fight. We therefore can't belong to our tribe fully and be devoted to them. Even we were late when Tagayia slaughtered them. We had grown lazy over the years, and now we only have one keeper to protect and yet I haven't...we haven't been able..."

"It is not anyone's fault but the united tribes of the north and the man behind them. They are the ones who will be sorry." Sagiri said with ice in his voice.

"I wasn't involved. You can't punish me for the sins of my father," Kiuga said, pouting. He still hated this talk.

"You are already punishing yourself by being a friend of the person the united tribes want to kill most, and following me to die in the south. You don't have to worry, I will not punish the innocent. I already know my enemy." Sagiri said, and he meant it. The north had raised him. His step-parents are northerners, and even his friends are all northerners and future generals.

"I remember his face. The man in red." Suddenly, Lira spoke from beside Sagiri, where she had been standing all the while. "I can show you now," she said as if she didn't realize they were in the middle of a battle.

"I don't know what you are about to show him, but I have a feeling this is not the time," Kiuga said.

The words did not leave Kiuga's mouth when sagiri felt it. Something heavy.

Something destructive.

He did not even have a second to react before it hit.

Chapter 299. MY TURN

One moment, they were talking about the history of N'garu while the arrows still hung motionless above the canyon, hundreds of steel points suspended in the night, while the Archive pressed against the stone walls hard enough to make them groan. Then a low metallic sound rolled out from somewhere behind the gates of Thazir.

Sagiri was the only one to hear it first because of his sharp hearing. Sagiri felt it before he understood it, but he knew it was something deadly, heavy, and hot. The archive could feel the heat before he could even see it. His eyes shifted toward the gate as a thin red line appeared between the massive stone doors. For a fraction of a second, nothing happened. Then the canyon turned white.

A sphere of fire erupted from inside the gate or within it in a place where he had not seen open. It all just happened too quickly.

It crossed the distance instantly.

It was so fast that he did not have the time to see the big yellow mass clearly.

The thing was not like the arrows he could hold back. Besides, he had not prepared for additional weight, and if he calculated wrong, his friends would be dead. He was given no time for attack, and this thing was bigger and faster than any arrow she had seen.

It looked more like the canyon itself had ignited and was rushing toward them. Heat struck first, violently enough to make the cloth snap and the air distort. Sagiri reacted immediately. His hand closed, and the Archive pocket ripped open behind the squad in a violent surge of darkness. One after another, he forced them backward into the pocket in a flash. There was no time to explain. No time to move carefully. The fire was already there.

Sagiri realized he could not shield them, shield against the incoming ball of fire, and still escape. The suspended arrows collapsed from the sky as the archive punched back. He shoved the last of the squad into the Archive and turned just as the fire hit.

The explosion swallowed the canyon in an instant. Stones shattered from the impact. Heat consumed the air. The shockwave tore through the walls and ripped entire sections of rock loose above him. Sagiri barely avoided the center by throwing himself sideways and pushing the archive out, but there was not too much time to hold it back completely. The edge of the blast still caught him.

Flames crashed into him and launched him violently through the canyon. His body struck the stone wall hard enough to split it before he bounced and rolled across broken ground. His clothes burned away instantly. His mantle caught fire. Heat tore through his shoulder, side, and back before he finally slammed to a stop.

For a moment, there was only burning air. The smell of flesh burning and fabric.

Then Sagiri moved.

He pushed himself up slowly through drifting dust and falling embers. Part of his outer robes had burned away completely. The fabric beneath was blackened and torn while red burns spread across one side of his body where the fire had reached him. Heat still rose faintly from him into the cold canyon air.

He looked toward the gate. Then, slowly straightened, and beneath the mask...

He smiled.

If he had anticipated the fireball, he could have stopped, but it was worth letting himself feel its weight, even by letting himself burn a little.

Now then...

Sagiri remained standing in the middle of the shattered canyon while heat rolled off the broken stone around him in waves. For a moment, he did nothing. Then the Archive stirred again.

The whole hit and impact might have only lasted seconds, but he needed to push out his squad. The archive hummed with the current impact. Sagiri pushed the archive out.

The massive invisible structure to others stretched across the canyon and reached upward over the cliffs before opening above one of the higher stone ridges overlooking the battlefield. One by one, his squad was released from within it, dropping safely onto the elevated ground far from the destroyed section of the canyon. They stumbled forward as they landed, turning immediately toward the impact site below.

He knew they would not remain still for long, and he wanted to finish what he had to do before they caught up.

Sagiri did not follow. Instead, the Archive folded inward around him. His figure disappeared, and for barely a second, the canyon remained empty.

The next moment, Sagiri landed at the place where the flaming ball had made contact. He did not attempt to soften the landing. His robes were burned black and torn apart in places, the outer cloth reduced to hanging fragments while soot and ash covered him from shoulder to boot. One side of his body looked darker from the burns, and the edges of his coat drifted behind him in loose, scorched strips. He fell through the smoke in complete silence.

The impact of his landing echoed through the canyon. Stone cracked beneath his feet, and more dust exploded outward. For several seconds, nobody could see anything.

The soldiers above the walls stared downward in silence. They waited patiently, relieved that they had been saved. They were busy loading another round of arrows. The fire launched from inside Thazir was meant to erase people. Even the commander had lowered his weapon already.

Little by little, the dust shifted and began to fade...

A shape stood inside it.

The smoke slowly separated, and Sagiri appeared beneath the canyon lights, standing exactly where the fire had struck. Burned. Blackened. Somehow, he was holding his weapon.

A sharp breath escaped someone above. Then another. Gasps spread through the canyon. One soldier took a step backward. Another lowered his weapon without realizing.

Whatever they were witnessing was an impossibility. Even more impossible was the fact that Sagiri was still standing. His mask had been burned off, and part of his clothes were gone, exposing the marks that were now crawling and glowing under his skin.

His right was burning even more red now, and a laugh cut through his throat. A cold sharo laugh tore through his throat, so chilling that everyone shifted uncomfortably. Even his teammates, who were still processing what was going on, were startled. Sagiri laughed hard till he hunched over, but he did not stop. He looked like a mass of white teeth flashing because of how black he had become from the attack. The laugh echoed in the whole canyon. It rose higher and higher, then louder and louder, then..

He suddenly stopped.

"I only wish to enter a city my ancestors helped build... yet you have tried to kill me twice, how cruel," Sagiri said after a second.

"I, Sagiri, the last of N'folu, survived seventeen years ago. I am not easy to kill!!" His voice was not only cold but angry.

"I will enter this city tonight. If I have to kill everyone, then I will do it. If Thazir wishes to kill me, then you are going to have to try harder.... but wait. You had your moment..." Sagiri tilted his head slightly, a maddening smile taking over his face.

"Now it's my turn." He said rather too calmly before he disappeared from his place on the ground and from sight.

Chapter 300. THE KAI

There was a pause, and even Sagiri's squad held their breath. One moment, he was below in the canyon, and the next, the space where he had stood was empty.

Nokai was the first to appear mid-air. Its killing intent was pulsing, almost drinking in all the life of the place. The soldiers above barely had time to react before something flashed across the defensive wall. The blade cut through the night in a single line of pale light and passed through the formation surrounding the commander. Men beside him froze. Soldiers behind him stopped mid-motion. They did not have time to move anyway.

Before their head could roll, a heartbeat later, Sagiri appeared. He dropped from above and landed directly in front of the commander with enough force to crack the stone beneath his feet. Dust burst outward across the platform. The commander instinctively stepped back, and Nokai returned at that exact moment. The blade fell through the air and struck into Sagiri's waiting hand with a sharp metallic sound that echoed through the canyon.

Sagiri rose slowly from the landing, blackened from the fire, burned cloth moving in the cold canyon wind, while faint smoke still lifted from his shoulders. Behind him, the soldiers finally moved again. One dropped to his knees. Another collapsed sideways. Then the rest followed, bodies and weapons hitting stone one after another. Sagiri stood between the fallen and looked directly at the commander. His voice was calm.

"I have given you too many chances to live, haven't I?" He tilted Nokai slightly and looked toward the closed gates behind them.

There gasps as sagiri held the commander by his neck and suspended him mid-air.

"I am yet to decide whether you deserve my blade or toss you over the wall. Decisions, decisions?" Sagiri said. The commander's eyes were opened with horror, but he couldn't say anything because of how hard Sagiri had him in a chokehold.

Right then, the arrow launchers clicked. It was clear they were ready to launch another round at sagiri.

Sagiri released Nokai, and this time the blade split into twenty. He had grown in strength yet again, and right at the moment, he was burning with the need to test how far he had grown. Sagiri turned his head slightly before he snarled.

"If you launch those. They will be the last thing you ever launch!!"

His voice echoed in the place, and everyone froze. They had seen him at work, stop hundreds of arrows and survive a whole fireball. They knew that he was not bluffing after he killed the dozen soldiers standing beside the commander.

"Sagiri, don't do it!!" Sagiri barely heard N'varu yell. It was clear they were running on top of the canyon, looking for a way to reach.

"The commander was turning with, and he would soon die either from choking as Sagiri contemplated a deserving way to kill him.

"It will disgust me if you die in my hands." Sagiri sighed. Without warning, he tossed the man over the wall. The commander's eyes widened. He had not expected that, but well.

"Commander No!!"

Gasps erupted across the canyon as soldiers rushed toward the edge. The commander disappeared into the open air, falling quickly down the wall with nothing to stop his fall but solid ground.

A second and he would meet his death. A fitting end for a stupid commander.

Then, suddenly, a sharp sound split through the night. An arrow tore across the canyon. It moved too fast for anyone to follow, wrapped in a thin stream of sand that peeled away behind it and glittered under the firelight. The shot came from somewhere beyond the walls. Nobody saw who released it.

In a flash, it crossed the distance and struck. The arrow drove clean through the commander's coat and buried itself in the stone face of the wall behind him. His body snapped violently to a stop. One second, he was falling, and the next, he hung suspended over the canyon edge, pinned by his coat against the cliff with space beneath his feet. Silence spread immediately. Soldiers froze. Heads turned. Eyes searched the darkness beyond the walls. Only a faint trail of drifting sand remained in the air.

Silence still hung over the canyon after the arrow pinned the commander to the wall.

Even sagiri retracted Nokai into one and turned around. That was an accurate shot and a deadly one. To stop a moving object with that accuracy while avoiding killing the commander in the process. He had only ever seen one other man with such a level of skill in the bow and arrow. Captain Salka. He was sure, however, that this was not Salka.

Soldiers searched the darkness, trying to find who had fired it, when suddenly something dropped into the center of the shattered impact site below. The landing echoed through the canyon. Stone cracked with the impact of their landing. Dust rose in a circle before slowly settling. When it cleared, a man stood at the exact place the fireball had exploded earlier. He held a bow in one hand with its lower end resting against the broken ground. He wore dark brown southern war robes layered beneath fitted armor marked with old gold lines and carved insignia across the chest and shoulders.

Cloth moved around him in the night wind while fine streams of sand drifted lazily around his boots despite the still air. He did not speak. He simply stood there and looked forward.

Then the others came.

Interesting.

Figures began appearing behind him from the canyon paths, upper walls, side routes, and stone passages hidden within Thazir. They arrived in silence and formed ranks without command. Most of them were moving almost as N'varu had. One line formed. Then another. Then another. Over a hundred warriors assembled behind the man until the canyon floor looked occupied by a small army.

Every movement was sharp and controlled. They carried different weapons, bows taller than men, curved blades, and hooked spears, but wore the same dark brown colors and southern markings. Their armor was lighter than the wall guards' and their faces harder. They looked like soldiers sent to end wars. Even the men guarding the walls unconsciously straightened and lowered their voices.

"We greet the Kai!!" The soldier on the wall fell to one knee, both hands crossed to the chest in tight fists.

The kai huh?

So this man was the general of the war of the South. So he was not the one who gave the command to flatten him with a fireball.

General of the War of the South.

He was truly worthy of that name. His aura screamed calmness, yet so much power. Sagiri could see how domineering he was.

"Finally, someone worthy of killing with my blade," Sagiri said in a cold voice before he moved.