

KEEPER 311

Chapter 311. LIRA'S REQUEST

After Sagiri filled Kiuga and the rest with the intel, the squad finally parted ways to go to their respective rooms. Well, all except one. Sagiri shed his cloak and hung it on a hook before he crossed the room to lie down. Even as Sagiri collapsed onto his bed, ready to pass out for a few minutes, Lira did not leave. Sagiri had thought she wanted to say something, but she remained silent, just standing in the middle of the room, fiddling with her fingers. Her misty grey eyes were facing the floor, and her heart was a mess.

"What is it? Thinking about strangling me to death?" Sagiri said, collapsing further onto the bed so that his head hit the pillow and his right hand lay across his eyes.

Sagiri could not feel any killing intent coming from her. Besides, Nokai could just kill her if he sensed any. What did she want?

"Go ahead and do it," Sagiri said. Not even he could understand the mind of a woman. Lira still did not move.

"Are you going to stand there all night and watch me sleep all night..." Sagiri said, starting to get sleepy. He was indeed tired after all the fighting, and emotionally, he was exhausted.

"He did not even get to finish the statement before something touched him, and a weight was added to the bed. Sagiri's eyes snapped open, and his head turned swiftly.

He wished he were dreaming, but Lira had joined him in bed, and she was already lying down at the edge of the bed. Sagiri's eyes widened in horror before he shot up. In the one year he had been in the south, he had grown into a full man, yet he was not the only one who had grown. Lira had grown even more into a beautiful maiden, and her body was now that of a woman. It was difficult to ignore that fact now that she was lying beside Sagiri, looking up at him with a feeling he couldn't decipher.

Sagiri jolted awake and sprang into a sitting position before he scuttled all the way to the other edge of the bed until his back hit the wall. Sagiri's heart beat out of his chest. Even Seya loved to play these pranks and lie on his bed most times just to wait for him or something. This, however, was different. The maiden in his bed was his age, and she was a fully woman. Sagiri's heartbeat increased for some reason,

and he froze. For a few moments that followed, only the sound of his panting could be heard as his chest rose and fell with laboured breaths.

Lira sat up but did not look at him, and when she did, she looked away immediately. A killing intent he could tell, but her intention right at the moment, he couldn't tell.

"Lira... what are you doing?" Sagiri asked when he finally found his voice.

"Can I sleep here?" She asked after a moment of her fingers pinching the cover edges. How was she still so ridiculous?

"Do you understand what you are asking?" Sagiri breathed in deeply to calm himself before he looked at the naive maiden sitting on his bed. Just looking at her sitting on his bed made him feel some type of way. He rubbed his brows and breathed again.

"Yes," She said, and Sagiri's eyes snapped away from his bed.

"Lira... we are a man and a woman who are not even betrothed. This is a taboo." Sagiri said. "You can't crawl into a random man's bed."

"You are not random." She said her heart was beating so loud that Sagiri could hear it clearly.

"Still.." Sagiri started to speak, but she cut him off.

"I won't do anything inappropriate." She said, and Sagiri froze. Bold of her to think she was the danger after slithering into a man's bed.

"Lira..." Sagiri sighed, holding onto the last shred of his sanity. She was so naive it was maddening. She and Azir could make a good match of stupidity. "Don't ever go into a man's bed." Sagiri chastised, getting ready to leave.

"I'll go sleep in your room. You sleep here then." Sagiri could not understand the logic behind her agenda. He barely stepped out of the bed, trying to do it as far away from her as possible, before a hand wrapped around his upper garment, stopping him in place.

"I have nightmares sleeping in new places... My nightmares are scary... I feel trapped in that place..." She said, and Sagiri stopped.

So this was the reason.

"Still..."

"Please, Sagiri. Only tonight." Sagiri had suffered nightmares, too, before the archive fully manifested. The leaking memories of the archive had kept him awake. Sagiri breathed in deeply and stepped out of bed.

"Fine. But we will not share the bed. I will go get your bedding and sleep on the floor. But only for tonight. This can not become a habit." Sagiri said. He turned around to see if she understood, but she had already let go of his shirt as if whatever he had to say after agreeing did not concern her. She was busy making herself comfortable as if she belonged there.

Why did he even bother with her?

Sagiri walked to Lira's room. He picked up the beddings and came back to his room. Lira was already snoring as if she did not have a single worry in the world, sprawled on his bed like it was her own. Sagiri sighed again before he started making his make-do bed.

Sagiri was too tired to care. He put out the candles before he lay down. He was out cold a few moments later. It was past midnight now.

Sagiri jolted awake right before dawn. Lira was still asleep when he woke up. For some reason, he was disturbed and restless. He was a bit rested, but something was calling to him. He could feel it in his bones. He stepped out of the room slowly, not to wake up Lira, who was still very much passed out.

Sagiri stepped out of the room. It was an hour before sunrise. He walked out of the section they had been afforded. He did not know what he was following, but he knew he had to go.

The moment he stepped out of the door to the section, however, someone was already waiting for him.

Chapter 312. AZIR'S TOUR

Sagiri opened his door, expecting an empty corridor, and stopped. Azir was standing outside casually as if he had not been waiting long, hands behind his back and expression far too awake for the hour. How was he even awake already? The moment he saw Sagiri, he straightened and smiled.

"Big brother! You are awake!" Azir cheered with excitement.

Just who had Sagiri offended in his past life?

He gets attacked when he wants to sleep, and right when he wakes up, he gets attacked again. Azir looked too cheerful in the early morning.

"Azir..." Sagiri said, furrowing his eyebrows.

Before Sagiri could ask anything, Azir stepped forward and held something out. Resting in his palm was a small trinket. Two tiny crossed blades bound together with dark thread and worn smooth around the edges from years of being handled. It looked old. Azir scratched the side of his face awkwardly.

"You said you couldn't sleep yesterday." He pushed the little blades closer. "My mother gave me these when I was younger. She said twin blades confuse nightmares because bad dreams don't know which one to follow." He laughed quietly at himself. "I don't know if that actually works... but I slept better after she gave them to me." He pressed one trinket into Sagiri's hand before he could refuse.

"Use one for tonight, maybe your nightmares will chase me instead." Then, with the same cheerful expression, he stepped backward and pointed down the corridor. "I'm going to buy sleeping medicine too, just in case my mother was wrong." He grinned. "Don't return them until you sleep properly."

What was he? Six?

He had waited out the door in the early morning to give him trinkets. Thazir was doomed. Even so, Sagiri could not help but breathe a laugh. He wanted to tell him the little sword toys were his mom's way of playing with his mind, but he refrained. The boy looked way too excited, and he was not a monster to crush his heart.

"Thank you, Azir," Sagiri said, letting the small thing get absorbed into the archive pocket.

"Don't lose it. I will keep mine well." Azir said in a slightly serious tone. It seemed the blades meant a lot to him.

"Okay, Azir. What else did you want?" Sagiri asked.

"I want to show you my turf." Azir lit up enough to burn the sun. The itching feeling had yet to leave Sagiri, but it's not like he knew what was making him restless in particular.

"Don't you have training or anything?" Sagiri asked in a strict tone.

"Well..." Azir scratched the back of his head. "I will train an extra hour tonight to make up for this." Sagiri shook his head.

"Fine. lead the way." Sagiri said in defeat.

"I knew you were curious about seeing my turf."

Azir walked ahead without waiting to see if Sagiri followed and immediately started talking.

"You know, nobody warned me chiefs were this difficult to host. First, you arrive looking like a rogue, then apparently, you don't sleep. It is my duty to make sure you sleep well," He glanced back briefly before continuing down the corridor.

The inner halls of the war fortress opened around them wide stone walkways, warm lantern light, and quiet servants moving in practiced silence. Azir seemed completely used to it.

"Anyway, let's go to the dining wing. We should eat before Uncle and his men get there. Uncle loves to talk a lot, and he will ask why I am bothering you." Azir yapped away about anything as he led the way. The boy was really just a baby in a big body and lacked self-awareness.

He pointed randomly ahead.

"Don't open the second courtyard gate unless you want old tailors asking who your tailor is." He said, looking at Sagiri's clothing behind the black cloak. He kept walking.

"Also, the food here is actually good, which surprised me because important places usually make terrible food for appearance." He lowered his voice dramatically. "The War fortress food is basically punishment with seasoning." He looked sideways at Sagiri.

"You're quiet. That's okay. I'll speak enough for both of us." What could Sagiri possibly say? The boy was barely breathing between the random information he was dumping on him. He immediately continued anyway.

"Oh... and if anyone asks if you're attending evening discussions, say I already stole you. It sounds official if I say it confidently." By then, they had already crossed two terraces and passed under carved stone arches leading deeper into the wing. Azir pushed open a pair of heavy doors, and warm air carrying spices and fresh bread rolled out. He stepped aside with a grin.

"See? I saved you from taking the long way here. You owe me at least half a conversation over food." That being said, Azir continued talking about anything and everything over breakfast and did not give Sagiri a chance to speak.

After breakfast, the Azir turf tour finally began.

"Don't worry, Wibo, my right-hand man, will take care of your squad."

"You've seen where serious people stay," he said cheerfully as they descended deeper into the War Fortress. "Now I'll show you where the interesting people live."

He took him into the fourth wing, the section occupied by him and his men. Unlike the fifth level, it felt alive. Azir gave a running explanation of everything without slowing down. He pointed out the training terraces, explained how units rotated through the wing, showed the common halls, observation paths overlooking Thazir, and several places his squad apparently considered important.

He greeted people constantly. Everyone in the fortress seemed to know him. The walk kept going until morning became late morning. Eventually, Azir brought Sagiri to his quarters and proudly showed him his collection wall. Weapons covered one side completely, paired blades, old bows, damaged spearheads, unusual arrows, knives, and pieces collected over the years.

Azir explained each one like it had a story worth telling, pointing out gifts, souvenirs, and at least one weapon he admitted he kept only because it looked impressive. By the time they finally left the fourth wing, the sun had already climbed close to midday, and Sagiri realized Azir had somehow spent hours talking without waiting for him to speak.

He did not mind anyway. It helped him keep the uneasy feelings he was feeling at bay.

"Azir, you shouldn't show anyone your wing easily," Sagiri said after the tour came to an end and his ears had started bleeding from how Azir had been chatting his ear off.

"I only showed you and Wibo my collection of weapons and my inner wing. Many people only treat me with respect because of my uncle and my title, and they dare not walk into my wing. You chastised me, and it made me happy, and you also said you won't recognize me as city lord. It made me so happy. Most people just flatter me, and I don't have friends. You already feel like a friend." Azir said.

To that, Sagiri understood. Perhaps he understood it more than anyone else. Being different meant no friends. He only made friends when he went to Galka Academy.

"You just have to find that one person who doesn't see you as your title or the power you wield," Sagiri said.

"That person is you and Wibo. Only Wibo spars with me seriously and chastises me. That is why I chose him to be my right-hand man." Azir said.

Perhaps the boy was not so naive. He was just a little immature.

"Still, you should understand you have a title, and your life will not be a normal one," Sagiri said. Azir nodded before he continued chewing his ears off back to the fifth wing.

Chapter 313. THE CHOPPING BLOCK

The evening of the third day came rather more slowly than Sagiri had expected. The second day had come to an end quickly. Perhaps because Azir saw it well to give him and his squad a tour of the outer city. They got to eat at every stop because they were in the company of the city lord. The feeling that had been pressing on sagiri's gut somehow had gone away on their journey to the outer city.

The city lord was pretty popular too, and he was beloved. Well, it was hard not to love the child. His innocence alone made people get drawn to him. They had not toured the whole of the capital, not even a quarter of it. Thazir is a whole country by itself, and they kept to the parts near the inner city.

"City Lord, when are you going to show us the chief of N'folu?" He got that question asked a lot. Sagiri had asked him not to tell them he was walking with him, as it could bring too much attention and stop the squad from having fun and eating snacks.

"I will bring him out once he rests well. I will officially throw a celebration to welcome him soon." Azir said with pride. Sagiri just shook his head. The boy was indeed reckless. He did not know yet that his words held so much weight.

Sagiri let it slide; it was not like anyone could stop Azir from running his mouth. It was a good outing to also help Kiuga see the city well, even if it meant just a little of it.

He was smart enough to come up with a plan if it came to it. It was also good to help everyone relax. Lira especially looked like she was seeing snacks and many things for the first time, and she sure dented the city lord's pockets. She was testing everything and anything. Kaka was with her in that regard. He had the appetite of a snake, and he was swallowing whole meals in seconds.

Azir was a ray of sunshine, and soon they hit it off even with Banga. He spent most of his time in Kiuga's armpit. It is as if Kiuga can't resist roughing up anyone shorter than him, and especially anyone as adorable as Azir.

Did he not recognize that that was the city lord?

Sagiri walked at the far back, just taking in the city he should have perhaps grown up in. It made him feel some type of way. There was a sadness he had not been able to get rid of since he came south. Even more so since he walked into Thazir. Seeing all the people wearing the tribe tattoos from the three tribes made him feel empty. He somehow wished he could see someone with the N'folu clan. The walk was making him sad in some way.

Azir made sure to pass him snacks now and pull him together with the squad. The day quickly came to an end.

The moment they headed into the inner city, the weird feeling crept back to him again. It made the hairs at the back of his neck stand. It wasn't fear. Even the archive was restless, and Nokai stirred. Something in the inner city had caught the archive's attention, and he did not know whether it was good or bad.

Could it be another beast like Myama? Yet somehow sagiri knew it was different. The moment they got to the inner city, the Kai was waiting for him, and he scooped him into his lair. Sagiri walked ahead with the Kai while the rest of the squad followed with Azir, who was busy telling them about the many places he was going to take them in the coming days and all the delicacies they would enjoy.

"It seems not even you can resist Azir's madness," Zifara said as they walked deeper into the fifth pentagon. This time, the whole squad and even Azir joined.

"He is something. I wonder how you have been able to keep him alive for this long." Sagiri said, and Zifara sighed.

"I have been a prisoner in this city for a few years. A city lord should not leave his city easily, so I can't bring him along. I have aged a few decades in the last decade." Zifara said, and sagiri could see how. Raising a person so oblivious and innocent is hard. Especially when he was a city lord of the two greatest cities of the south. The boy was one of the most powerful figures of the South, yet he had managed to keep his innocence. Sagiri did not even want to imagine how much Zifara had had to work.

There was silence until they finally reached the meeting room.

"So what is it?" Sagiri asked as soon as he was seated.

"There has been movement. Many of the council members are on the move." Zifara said, sinking into his seat. His right-hand man sat beside him. Azir sat too, and Wibo stood behind him. N'varu stood behind sagiri with Kiuga, and the rest just stood around the table.

"We are having more visitors in the city!" Azir exclaimed with happiness.

"Already two council members are in the city. The beast master and the Archivist. The archivist is to be expected. He records all history and loves to watch it unfold." The general said. "There has been movement from many others, too, according to my eyes all over the south. They should be here before the week's end."

"I see. So I should minimize my presence outside the fortress."

"Indeed. Things always spill over when too many powers are gathered in one city." Zifara said.

"And some could use this time to further their means," Kiuga said.

"Your man is right. So, better not give them a chance to have something to hold against your head. Your position is still fragile." Zifara said.

"Who would dare cause trouble for big brother in my city?" Azir seethed. It was almost adorable to see him wear a serious face. "I will execute them for treason." He added pouting.

"Azir, you need to be careful, too. Many still think you don't deserve to be the city lord. If they fault him, they will fault me and you. There are still a few months until you take the seat officially. A lot can happen in between." Zifara warned.

"I would love to see them try. I will be disappointed if they don't put on a good show for me." Sagiri said.

"Don't underestimate how far people are willing to go to further their means." Zifara said.

"They should not underestimate how far I am willing to go either," Sagiri said in a cold tone.

"Big brother is so cool," Azir said, hearts flying from his eyes.

"What about the supreme chief?" Sagiri asked.

"She has no say in whether the council can meet or not. Her vote, however, matters. Her side, however, can't win if she is far too outnumbered." Zifara said. "She has to listen to the voice of her people."

"Her?" N'varu asked.

"Yes. Our previous chief died seven years ago, and her Kun took over. It was agreed by the council, too. A supreme chief is a symbol of unity, but she doesn't hold infinite power. Her taking the seat was the safe option then. A war was brewing back then." Zifara said.

"Sounds too convenient for me," Kiuga said.

"I might need you to give me that man of yours." The General said.

"He is my strategist. I dare not." Sagiri refuted immediately.

"It did seem convenient indeed. But she has not been a bad supreme chief, and so the criticism has faded over the years."

"Her decision this time is of importance, isn't it?" Kiuga said, and Zifara nodded.

"Interesting. So it is not only my head on a chopping block." Sagiri said

"That is why I ask you not to leave the fortress. My head would be next on the chopping block." Zifara said. He had welcomed Sagiri, and if things went wrong, then it would cause a domino effect.

"Don't worry. I will not bring trouble on you." Sagiri said. This is why he hated inner cities. Too many plots and schemes.

Chapter 314. NIGHT

The wind blew on Sagiri's cloak. He had spent the third day in the fortress, daring not to go anywhere. He currently sat at the edge of the wall of the fifth wing, blending into the darkness that was starting to blanket the horizon. He was feeling even more restless, no matter how much he tried to calm himself. He had not been able to sleep a wink. Instead, he spent his night listening to Lira snore softly, who had come to sleep in his room again. She was kind enough to come with her beddings and sprawl on the floor. Sagiri did not have the strength to chastise her and just let her do whatever she wanted.

He was far from being when dawn came. He spent the whole day sitting in his room in the fifth wing with his eyes closed and his breathing steady. He let the noise of the fortress fade and entered meditation the way he had done countless times before. Inhale, exhale. Slowly, then normally, that was enough. His thoughts would settle, and whatever remained from battle would sink to the bottom.

But today it didn't. There was a feeling sitting deep inside him that refused to leave. Restless and heavy. It was not sharp enough to be feared and not loud enough to be a danger. He tried breathing more slowly. Cleared his mind again. Focused on the flow of the Archive. Nothing. The feeling stayed.

His chest felt tight in a way he did not understand. He had reached the South. He had not been rejected. He had entered Thazir. Yet his mind refused to become quiet. The more he tried to calm himself, the more obvious it became that meditation was not touching it. He had asked his squad not to disturb him.

Perhaps changing environments could help. Sagiri walked to the roof of the fortress. Yet again, things did not work. Sagiri opened his eyes and stared ahead. After a while, trying so hard without succeeding.

Two hours later, Sagiri was still sitting on the roof of the fifth wing. The position had not changed. His breathing had not changed. The city had shifted ahead of him as the day moved forward, and still the feeling remained. The looming Supreme Chief's house remained an eyesore in his eyes, yet its looming huge structure couldn't be ignored. Further out, the council house still sat.

Perhaps it was his hate for inner cities and schemes that made him restless. He only knew he needed to be somewhere else.

He stayed still for a moment longer before exhaling once and giving up. Meditation wasn't helping. Sitting wasn't helping. Thinking wasn't helping. So he did what he always did when stillness became unbearable. He could go take a stroll in the outer city and perhaps sleep on a random family roof and come back to the inner city at dawn.

He pushed the already humming archive out.

It spread outward from where he sat without sound, black space unfolding across rooftops and over the edge of the War Fortress. It stretched far past the inner city and reached toward the quieter parts of Thazir, flowing through space until it settled somewhere beyond the inner city walls. Sagiri paused for a second.

Sorry, General, I can stay in this place one more second.

Then he moved.

His body disappeared. One moment, he sat on the roof. The next thing, he was standing perched on a roof outside the inner city. Far away from the War Fortress, on a distant rooftop overlooking another section of the city. He landed lightly and remained crouched for a second before straightening.

The roof belonged to one of the taller stone buildings outside the inner city. From here, the fortress and the military district around it looked farther away and somehow smaller. The sounds were different, too. Just distant city noise, moving air, and life continuing below.

Sagiri stood quietly with his cloak shifting in the breeze. The restlessness he was feeling faded away instantly, and he was able to breathe and feel calm after a long time. It was still the early hours of the night, and the streets were flooded with families buying their meals. The smell of home-cooked meals filled this part of town, making him feel nostalgic. He always came back home to Rusha's cooking after a day of hunting small beasts. Then a bath would also be waiting for him.

Without realising it, Sagiri was jumping from roof to roof, keeping to the darkness, before he finally found a rather tall roof, and he perched on it. From there, he could see many homes and families going back and forth. It was peaceful indeed. There was a lot of love in the air. A Mother scolding their kid and

young lovers walking the night and buying a trinket for each other. Drunk friends walking home after a day of working and drinking. The normal rattle tassel he had not realised he had missed.

Sagiri leaned his back against the long chimney, which was warm. His eyes felt heavy just watching the people below. Their peaceful aura was contagious. A few miles away from the uptight and rigid ones in the inner city. He sighed, and his eyes dropped. He must have been so tired because he could not resist the call of sleep that crept up to him. Before he knew it, he was passed out cold just like Zaira, who had stirred ever since that day at the gate.

The sleep was one of the most peaceful sagiri had ever had since he came into Thazir capital. Soon, however, he sprang awake. This time, his awakening was loud, as if the place's silence had suddenly pulled him awake. He was not the only one who was awake. Zaira was awake too, looking in the opposite direction. The city was silent now. If sagiri could guess it was midnight or past.

"What are you looking at?" Sagiri asked, getting some feeling of urgency from Zaira.

Sagiri stood up immediately and faced the direction the little beauty was facing, but there was only darkness and houses. Sagiri, however, had a feeling he should go look in that direction.

"What has finally caught your interest? I am curious to see." Sagiri said, starting to move in the direction the eyes of Zaira had yet to turn from.

Chapter 315. NO!

Sagiri stared into the darkness for a moment longer before he stood slowly to his feet. He was feeling quite rested to say the least, and his senses were sharp and focused. The darkness was peaceful, and just the sound of steady heartbeats could be heard for miles. The wind that had been blocked by the chimney to allow him to sleep caressed the exposed parts of his face and hands, violently making goosebumps rise on his skin.

He took a step forward on the slightly slanting roof, and his cloak shifted once behind him. He stepped to the edge of the roof, tempting the strong wind to throw him off the roof. After a long, unhurried moment, he jumped slightly and stepped to the edge of the roof.

He rested his weight for a while, his eyes staring into the dimly lit street below, before he crouched low and jumped.

He crossed the first gap easily and landed silently on another rooftop before immediately moving again. Roof after roof passed beneath him. He didn't run this time. Just moved fluidly from roof to roof. Just enough to follow the direction Zaira kept watching. He moved over hanging lanterns and narrow alleys, over courtyards with extinguished fires.

"Zaira, you better not be plotting my death," Sagiri whispered. The strong wind that was blowing picked up his voice and dispersed it immediately.

Sagiri dropped low at the next street and used stone awnings to push himself upward again. He had a feeling he was almost getting out of one district and entering another. The city beneath him stretched in layers, bridges overhead, connected roofs, open streets glowing amber below. His shadow crossed walls and slipped over carved balconies. A cat darted out of his path and glared at him. Cats are truly just unique creatures.

Wind caught the edge of his cloak as he cleared another gap and landed lightly on a sloped roof. Zaira had changed the position she was looking at again and again, and Sagiri just followed. He went further and further in a direction he did not know. The district slowly changed. The streets became narrower and the lights fewer. This part of Thazir city felt even darker and more abandoned. It seemed like a place that people avoided even during the daytime and completely avoided at night. The sounds disappeared and were still.

Zaira kept looking ahead.

"I am starting to think you are taking me to a place where I will meet my end," Sagiri said, but kept walking deep into the night. He was walking on a long roof now. This one looked old and faded, and he had to be careful not to fall through.

Sagiri crossed another rooftop and slowed as he reached the edge overlooking a narrow street below. Zaira had gone completely still on his wrist, her small head fixed toward a dark alley cutting between the buildings. Sagiri looked down without much thought at first.

He had not been paying attention. He had not spread his senses. He had not expected anything. This was Thazir. The inner districts. Safe. For the first time in a long time, he had allowed himself to stop watching everything and just take a walk in the city. It's not like even with his senses not pushed out meant he

was an easy target. He was a trained warrior under the deadliest man of the north, according to him. Captain Salka. He was no easy target.

Suddenly, however, the smell of blood reached his nose, freezing him in place. Sagiri stopped immediately, turned around swiftly, and inhaled deeply. He pushed out his senses immediately. The place was quiet indeed. The smell, however, could not be ignored.

"Why did you bring me here, Zaira. Do you drink blood or something?" Sagiri asked. He was alarmed, but he was not worried yet. All the people he cared about were back at the Fortress. If someone chose to die here tonight, then it would not be his problem. The smell was fresh enough not to be ignored. It could not have been more than an hour since someone bled.

Where is the body then?

His expression changed. His eyes sharpened, and he let the right eye grow sharper, tearing into every dark nook and cranny. His gaze shifted toward the alley, following Zaira's gaze. Zaira remained staring. Sagiri looked at her briefly before he stepped off the roof. He dropped silently through the night onto the ground below. His cloak shifted once behind him before he landed directly at the mouth of the street below.

His boots touched stone, and he remained standing. The alley stretched ahead between tall canyon buildings with only a few lanterns reaching inside. The smell was stronger now. Sagiri stood there quietly.

Whoever was bleeding must have been in there, and for some reason, Sagiri could tell Zaira wanted him to follow.

Sagiri remained still for a moment after landing, letting his eyes adjust and his senses settle properly this time. The smell of blood lingered in the air ahead, thin but enough. His posture changed almost immediately. The ease from earlier disappeared, and he grew alert. Someone had disturbed him and Zaira's rest. Especially his, and he wanted to know who dared do such an atrocious act.

He walked into the alley slowly but stayed close to the walls. It was so dark in the place that he could almost touch the darkness. His cloak stopped moving as much. There was no wind in this place. His footsteps made almost no sound against the stone. When the street widened, he crossed through the shadow instead of the light. This place looked like a dead part of Thazir. This must have been a part of

the district where delinquents stayed, doing whatever they did to keep it from the eyes of the city lord and his men.

Sagiri moved silently through the alley until it narrowed and opened into a lower section carved directly into the canyon wall, where homes disappeared inward beneath stone overhangs and connected tunnels. Well, places that looked like they were once homes but were now abandoned. No normal man could allow his wife and kids to live in such a place.

The place felt buried beneath the city. Quieter and Darker. He approached the turn and shifted to step inside when his boot pressed against something small. He stopped instantly. His foot lifted. Sagiri stepped back and crouched without making a sound.

His fingers reached into the shadow and picked up a small metal object. The moment it touched his palm, he froze. One of the tiny crossed blades was tied with dark thread, which was no doubt made to be attached to a garment. His eyes remained on it. His other hand moved automatically beneath his robes and returned holding the trinket Azir had given him earlier that day.

He looked between them. Same shape. Same worn edges. Same thread. One in his hand. One lying here. At the mouth of a place, Azir should have no reason to be. The blood smell suddenly felt stronger. Sagiri slowly raised his eyes toward the dark passage ahead. Zaira remained completely still on his shoulder before she finally closed her eyes and went back to sleep as if her mission was complete. So this was why the beast had woken up. For a moment, nothing moved. Then something cold settled inside his chest.

Azir?

Azir!!

It possibly couldn't be!

Sagiri's blood ran cold for some reason.

Chapter 316. KILL OR BURGAIN WITH?

That stupid child. Wasn't he there when the general said not to step out of the fortress until the council sat down? Even more so, who could dare to be audacious enough to hurt the city lord?

Sagiri remained crouched at the entrance with both trinkets in his hands. For a second, nothing happened. Then something inside him went quiet. The silence that could only hold the storm that had started brewing deep inside him. His fingers closed around the small crossed blades, and he slowly stood. The warmth that had been on his face since he entered the Thazir Capital City disappeared completely. His eyes lifted toward the darkness ahead, and the city seemed to grow still around him.

Then his senses pushed out. His awareness spread violently through the underground passage and into the homes carved into the canyon. The darkness unfolded in his mind. Stone. Air movement. Distances. Footprints. Heat. Smells. Even the tiny shifts in pressure. His attention moved through corridors and walls with practiced precision until the space ahead stopped being unknown. He could feel even the little rats crawling by.

The blood smell became clear in a few seconds. Sagiri's expression didn't change. But something cold had settled over him. In that moment, he realized something irritating. At some point, without noticing, he had become protective of the boy. Not because he had called him big brother, but the peaceful innocence hanging around the boy, perhaps it was the tours he gave him and the endless chatter that made his ears bleed. The boy even gave him a useless trinket to ward off his nightmares as if he were six or something.

Somewhere between all of that, Sagiri had unconsciously placed Azir somewhere his mind considered him as his possession. No one was allowed to harm the little brat until he became a man worthy of his title and landed a blow on Sagiri. They were yet to have their sparring match.

Sagiri finally understood why Zaira had woken up. The little beast must have gotten attached to the boy, too. Sagiri moved with urgency this time. If he had known sooner, he could not have taken his time getting here. His cloak shifted once as he stepped forward into the underground passage. His movements became silent again.

Sagiri pushed the archive out, ready to move within it after a while of him internalizing the trail. The smell of blood followed. He moved one and landed deeper into the place. He wondered what the purpose of the underground tunnels was. He did not have time to waste before he moved again and again and again until he finally stopped.

He could actually feel Azir's presence now. They were not too far into the place yet, but the place was still hidden.

"...That is not true." Azir's voice was the first thing Sagiri could hear when he finally landed.

"It doesn't matter if it's true or not." A foreign voice said.

"That is not good. You people told me there were children hidden here who were suffering, and I came to take care of them," Azir said. Even Sagiri had to fight the urge to groan as he closed in slowly on the position. From where he had landed, he could tell Azir was on a level below. Perhaps the place was built long ago, in case a war were to take place, for civilians to hide away.

From where Sagiri stood. It was thirty feet to the place on the ground where Azir was sitting. He was dressed in a low-ranking warrior's attire.

Don't tell me he actually snuck away from the fortress with such an obvious disguise and managed to get caught or fooled? Sagiri shook his head.

Azir was clutching Wibo, who was leaning on him. It was clear he was bleeding badly. Not just from how he was leaning but from the nauseating smell that reached Sagiri's nose.

So the blood belonged to Wibo?

When had Wibo realized his master had made a stupid decision and decided to fight?

"Are you stupid or something?" One of the two dozen men surrounding Azir said. The men were scattered all around the place. Some did not even look concerned.

"No. I care about people, unlike you, who lie. You are evil." Azir said, and laughter filled the place.

"You are even more stupid than I thought. I am disappointed." Another said. "You serve the purpose anyway, all we have to do is keep you here and use you to control the chief, or just kill you and blame the N'folu rogue. Perhaps then the general will tear him to shreds, and we can win.

"You can't accuse big brother like that. He won't kill me. Uncle won't believe you!" Azir said with restlessness in his voice.

"He even calls him big brother now?" One chuckled under his breath.

"What the Kai believes is not important. What matters is what everyone in the Thazir capital believes. You fired a cannonball at him. Who would have more motive to kill you than him?" The man with an ugly scar marring his jaw said. He seemed to be the one in charge.

So this was what this was all about?

"Big brother is not that petty. He is kind and awesome. Why are you all planning to do bad things to him?" Azir defended again, and if Sagiri was not trying to keep his presence hidden, he would have groaned. He wanted to hear more and watch how far they were willing to go.

Wibo was bleeding, but he was not going to die soon. His heartbeat was still steady. In another hour or two, however, he would be dead for sure.

"Your big brother should have stayed dead. His coming to the south is a problem for some people." The man with a crooked tooth beside scar face said. He twisted his voice to a sarcastic one when he said Big brother.

"Big brother has not done anything to you. Why are you saying such cruel..."

Shut up!" Scarface said. "Big brother, big brother, if you say big brother one more time, I will kill you right now!" Scarface snapped.

"Why do you have to hurt Wibo? Let him go, and you can do whatever you want to do with me. He is bleeding badly." Azir said after a while.

Did the boy want to die sooner?

Sagiri could have been more surprised if he had actually shut his mug.

"You should blame yourself. That wound is your fault and more so his fault for having a slightly bigger brain than yours. If he hadn't noticed something was wrong, he wouldn't have been hurt," Crooked teeth said.

"Do you still think you are in a position to bargain? The only reason you are not dead is that we still don't know whether holding your life over the general will be more beneficial or killing you will be even more beneficial." Scarface added.

"Whatever you do, you will not win against Big Brother. He did not die even with my fireball, and his blade is awesome." Azir said after a while, and Sagiri breathed in disappointment and defeat. Just what did the boy wish to achieve by adding fuel to the fire?

"Are you threatening us?" Crooked face said with a sneer.

"It is the truth. Big brother..."

"What did I say about saying that name again?" Scarface's eyes flashed with rage. Wibo groaned, getting ready to protect Azir, but he had grown weak.

"Wibo hung in there. Please let Wibo go, or let me stop his bleeding." Azir begged now with his eyes wide.

"This kid is so annoying." Scarface seethed. "I will just kill your friend to shut you up."

With that, he drew his blade and drew it back.

"No!"

Chapter 317 BIG BROTHER

"No!" Azir screamed. In that moment, fear slipped into the young city lord's heart. Fear of watching his friend die. His feet were tied, but he could still move. They had not cared to tie Wibo's feet because he was too weak to get far by himself anyway. Azir, without thinking, threw himself in front of the blade. He watched with horror and fear as the sharp blade came for his neck.

Was this how he was going to die?

He was sure that this blade would kill him, unlike Sagiri's blade, which came to a stop before killing him.

"I am sorry, big brother, I won't be able to spar with you and defeat you," Azir whispered.

Sagiri had not expected things to escalate that quickly. Well, he had expected them to escalate rather quickly because of Azir's mouth, but not that quickly. The little city lord was rather annoying in his manner of being naive.

Sagiri's eyes narrowed. He stretched his hand out, and Nokai appeared on it. The blades snapped out instantly, answering to Sagiri's urgency. All this happened in half a heartbeat as the assassin's blade descended toward Azir's throat.

Sagiri had not missed even the little whisper from Azir. He could not believe those words could be anyone's last words. Was that the boy's biggest regret?

A flash tore through the place as Nokai moved at lightning speed. The flash of the sharp blade tore through the dimly lit place as it moved. It, however, did not provide time for anyone to react before there was a clashing impact between two blades. The impact was loud and instant, and gasps echoed in the empty place at the unexpected impact. Scarface's blade stopped instantly with a sharp metallic sound that echoed through the underground chamber.

His blade split in two and scattered across the room. A silver blade now stood between Azir and Scarface.

Nokai.

Two screams filled the place at that moment. One was a scream of agony, almost, and another scream of terror.

The first scream belonged to Scarface, whose wrist was now missing from his arm and was attached to one part of the blade lying across the place. The second scream belonged to Azir, who had his eyes tightly shut while clutching his neck, which was still very much intact.

He was, however, now covered in blood, squirting from the severed hand of Scarface.

Crooked teeth froze in shock as the pressure in the room suddenly changed. The men who had not been paying interest and those who had scrambled to their feet and their eyes started searching the dim place relentlessly. The place also had half a dozen entries, and they took defensive positions staring at each entrance.

Azir was still screaming bloody murder. How long was he going to scream for before he realized he was not dead!

"Azir. That is not behaviour befitting of a City lord." Sagiri said from above, and suddenly there was pindrop silence.

Azir had not expected to hear such a voice, and he opened one eye dramatically before opening the other. He touched his neck dramatically.

"Am I dead? Is Big Brother not pleased with me and chastises me even in the afterlife? Azir said with a wide smile as if he was reminiscing about a bittersweet memory.

"You are not dead. But you will be dead soon if you don't explain to me why you saw it as a good idea to follow strangers after you promised me you would think of every decision you make." Sagiri said from above. Azir froze, and his face turned upwards. The lanterns keeping the place lit were dim, and from where he sat, he could only see a silhouette in a crack up above.

Every head snapped upward toward the narrow stone supports crossing nearly thirty feet above the chamber where Sagiri stood in complete silence, half hidden in darkness.

"Big brother? Big brother!!" Azir's voice cut through the silence. His voice carried excitement as he looked up, beaming. "Wibo! Big brother is here!!" Azir shook Wibo, who was still holding onto the last shred of consciousness. The boy was rather loyal and strong.

"Don't call me big brother. I will deal with you later." Sagiri chastised before his eyes turned cold when he looked at the assassins. "Now, now, what to do with you?" Sagiri's voice carried mischief and ice. His eyes looked empty in the dim lantern light. The two dozen men changed their positions, their faces facing upwards, their blades drawn.

"How did he get up there?" One of the men said

"Who is he?"

"It can't be... who the boy calls big brother..."

"It is very much Big Brother to that delinquent, and you don't get to say it. And I am also very much the rogue chief whom you wish to frame. Framing me is okay, but killing a child? How very dishonourable!" Sagiri said in disgust before he stepped off the ledge.

There were gasps as the dozen watched the dark silhouette, shrouded in darkness, suddenly plunge from the high place. Sagiri dropped straight down through the darkness while Nokai snapped from the ground violently and rose to meet him midway in his descent. back into his hand. His cloak tore behind him, and black Archive energy burst outward around his body before he landed between Azir and the assassins with enough force to crack the stone floor beneath him.

The impact shook the chamber. Dust exploded outward. Before anyone could react, Nokai flashed once through the darkness in a black arc so fast it barely existed. The ropes binding Wibo and Azir's feet were the first to come off before one of the kidnappers was separated at the chest and collapsed before the blood even reached the ground.

It was Scarface who was screaming and groaning in pain.

"Too much noise. I am not a morning person, and I dare say you all have woken me from my peaceful nap." Sagiri said, still facing down. There was silence before there was nervous mumbling. The stench of fear was maddening in the place.

"How did he just jump from so far up there, and he is not dead?" crooked teeth swallowed nervously, all the earlier pride disappearing from his face.

"He can't be..."

"Impossible!" Another gasped in horror.

"I told you big brother is not easy to kill, and he is so cool." Azir marveled.

"Shut up and bind Wibo's wounds if you don't want him dead. He will be dead in less than an hour and a half if he keeps bleeding this way." Sagiri said his head still lowered while he remained standing in front of Azir with Nokai lowered at his side, while his cloak slowly settled behind him. Then he finally lifted his eyes toward the remaining men, and the killing intent filling the chamber became so overwhelming it felt difficult to breathe.

"Now then, gentlemen. Shall we get this over with?" Sagiri said. His voice was laced with so much ice that even Azir got chills.

Chapter 318. A STEP BACK

"Now then, gentlemen. Shall we get this over with?" Sagiri said. His voice was laced with so much ice that even Azir got chills.

Sagiri took one step forward, and the entire chamber recoiled with him. The remaining kidnappers instinctively backed away, weapons rising shakily as the pressure pouring from him became unbearable.

Nokai slowly lifted from his hand and suspended itself in the air behind him. Then the blade split. Once. Twice. Again. Silver metal separated with sharp metallic sounds until dozens of identical dark blades

hovered behind Sagiri in a wide circle, each one turning silently until their points aligned with a different man in the chamber.

Nearly two dozen blades. Nearly two dozen targets. The kidnappers froze as the edges hummed faintly in the darkness, waiting only for Sagiri to move a finger. The Archive leaked violently around the room, black lines spreading across the stone floor while cracks crawled along the walls beneath the pressure. Sagiri's eyes remained fixed on them without emotion. The men had not expected such a turn of events, and their fear was palpable.

"This is the part you beg for your lives, and I pretend to care," Sagiri said, that there were nervous swallows of saliva.

"We were just sent..." One man started to say, but a cold laugh interrupted him.

Sagiri's cold and chilling laugh filled the chamber. It was humourless and chilling. He laughed for a long while, making the fear of the assassin grow. He looked like a maniac to them, and they were starting to realize he was not going to let them go.

"Let me guess, you were going to say, 'we were just sent here, this is not our fault, or I have a family, or we were just following orders, and we are only doing our job. Or we don't deserve to die.'" Sagiri taunted in a cold voice, his lips curled in disgust over his teeth.

"But do you know what I see? A bunch of selfish men who can even kill a child without patting and eyelash just because someone else asked it of you. Doesn't he have a family? Does his right-hand man, whom you wanted to easily kill, not have a family? Just where do you draw the line? As long as someone is weak, you are willing to do anything you want to them! Is that it?!" Sagiri's voice rose an octave. "Why are you trembling now that someone stronger stands in front of you? Shouldn't you be laughing and making fun of the young city lord?!" The blades suspended in the air moved forward, staying only inches away from the men's throats.

He was genuinely going to kill every person there.

"Now then, I want you to look at me clearly. I am the last N'folu and not easy to kill. I will also rid the world of scum like you." Sagiri said. Even the assassins understood that Sagiri could not be debated with. They had also taken their fair share of lives, and they knew too well that look in his eyes.

Sagiri sighed. He had not wished to shed blood in Thazir, and he had been happy to know he would not have to for a while yet... He lifted his finger and his face, making sure to remember the faces of every one of them.

The men trembled with fear. It was coming. Their end was coming. Just when Sagiri was about to allow Nokai to finish the task, however, a small, strained voice spoke from behind him, suddenly cutting through the tension.

"Big brother... stop." Silence hit the chamber instantly. The floating blades trembled once in the air. Sagiri didn't move at first.

"Please, Big Brother, don't kill them," Azir said in an even lower voice now. Barely a whisper

"I can't. I can't not kill them. They were willing to kill you and Wibo. Why should I show mercy when they were willing to show you none?" Sagiri said his finger was trembling with the urge to finish the task. There was silence before there was shuffling of feet behind him. He soon felt a hand engulfing his other hand.

"Because big brother, you are kind. You are not like them. I know you hate having to do this, especially since Uncle told me your blade was never meant to kill but protect. Don't let them stain you. Let's take them to Uncle, and he can punish them." Azir said, and Sagiri's finger trembled even more.

"You are in pain... I hate that I am the cause of it this time." Azir added, and Sagiri's finger finally paused.

He had never wanted or wished to kill, yet each time he had been forced to. Little by little, he had become so used to using his weapon that he did not know another way. It was either him or them, and he had not been given a chance to choose. Yet now...

"You know you do talk too much..." Sagiri said in a strained voice. The blades did not lower for a long moment as Sagiri's eyes remained set on his target. Then slowly, very slowly, the killing intent in the room loosened just enough to allow everyone to breathe again. Nokai remained suspended above them even so.

Sagiri's eyes remained on the men while Nokai hovered above them in dozens of suspended blades, each point fixed perfectly against a throat, a chest, or a skull.

Nobody dared move even after his killing intent dissipated. The pressure in the chamber was still unbearable.

Then Sagiri finally spoke. One word.

"Kneel." The word dropped into the place like a weight itself.

The kidnappers hesitated for less than a second before collapsing to their knees almost at once. Some dropped their weapons immediately. Others could barely keep their hands steady. Sagiri watched them coldly until every last one of them had sunk to both their knees.

"Acknowledge him." His gaze shifted slightly toward Azir behind him. "Acknowledge your City Lord."

Silence lingered for a heartbeat before one of the men forced the words out.

"City Lord Azir..."

Another followed quickly. Then the rest joined in desperately.

"City Lord Azir." "City Lord Azir." "City Lord Azir." The chant filled the underground chamber over and over until it became desperate and uneven from fear. Sagiri did not stop them immediately. He stood motionless while the voices repeated the title again and again beneath the hovering blades. Only after the words had filled the room enough times did Nokai finally react.

The suspended blades trembled once before collapsing inward all at once, merging back together into a single black weapon that snapped violently back into Sagiri's hand. The pressure crushing the chamber loosened instantly, leaving only heavy breathing, fear, and the sound of kneeling men too terrified to lift their heads.

"Now that wasn't hard, was it?" Sagiri said, and the men kneeling before him shook their heads enough for them to fly off.

"Big Brother, Wibo looks bad..." Azir said from behind Sagiri, forcing him to turn instantly.

"He will be dead in an hour if he doesn't get treated properly," Sagiri said, and Azir gasped.

"Now who needs a ride?" Sagiri asked with a wicked smile settling on his face.

Chapter 319. WHO GAVE HIM AWAY?

The chamber remained silent after Nokai retracted, the kidnappers still kneeling with fear written plainly across their faces. Sagiri looked at them for another second before speaking flatly.

"Does anyone need a ride?" He asked with a wicked smile settling on his face.

"Brother, you have a carriage?" Azir asked, and Sagiri's smile widened. Even so, he ignored the question.

Confusion immediately spread through the room. Even Azir blinked at him. Sagiri ignored it completely and stepped toward one of the assassins, the one trembling hardest. Nokai rested loosely at his side now, but the threat somehow felt worse.

"I need one of you to do something for me. You, with crooked teeth. Go tell your master. He should try harder next time. I am disappointed." The assassin swallowed hard and nodded violently. Sagiri didn't wait for another response. The man did not wait to be asked twice before quickly running towards one of the six exits.

"No, I have something worse. Everyone, breathe in." Sagiri turned to Azir after the footsteps of crooked teeth got further and further. Everyone had a puzzled expression on their face.

Sagiri didn't wait for another response. The Archive suddenly unfolded beneath the chamber, swallowing the room in darkness. Several men panicked as space twisted around them before they found themselves trapped inside the black stillness of the Archive pocket alongside Azir and the others.

Sagiri moved immediately. The Archive stretched outward through Thazir, and he stepped within it, crossing enormous distances in seconds before emerging briefly atop a rooftop overlooking another district. Even with the Archive, he could not jump directly into the inner city with the added weight and without destabilizing the movement through the layered canyon structures, so he pushed the Archive outward again and moved a second time. Then a third. Then a fourth. Each jump carried them deeper toward the center of Thazir while the city blurred past in fragments of rooftops, bridges, and sleeping streets beneath the night.

By the final movement, the warm lights of the inner city had risen around them once more.

The entire process took only a few seconds. Four movements within the Archive and the outer city disappeared behind Sagiri until he finally stepped out before the gates of the War Fortress, landing softly. The archive collapsed and shrank instantly to a small size.

The guards reacted at once at the unexpected arrival, and weapons rose along the walls.

Archers turned from the battlements above. Soldiers poured toward the entrance while alarm calls echoed through the fortress levels. They had not seen him leave or arrive, and he did not look friendly in the slightest. One moment, the gates had been secure, and the next, a man cloaked in darkness had appeared directly outside.

"Identify yourself!" One of the gate warriors shouted as spears lowered toward him. Sagiri walked forward anyway, unbothered by the threat. His cloak moved lightly behind him while Nokai rested quietly at his side. The soldiers stiffened as he approached, but held their positions.

"Stop there!" Another barked. Sagiri finally stopped a short distance from the gate and lifted his eyes toward the walls.

"Where," he asked calmly, "is your City Lord?" The men exchanged looks before hardening again. One stepped forward, trying to sound fearless.

"You don't ask questions here, stranger." Sagiri stared at him for a second. Then his voice lowered slightly.

"Stranger?" The pressure in the air shifted immediately. "Then tell me this." His eyes moved across the walls slowly. "Who did I just save from the jaws of death if it's not the city lord you should have been protecting with your lives?" Silence hit the gate instantly.

The silence at the gate stretched uncomfortably after Sagiri's question. The guards looked at one another, uncertainty replacing some of their earlier confidence.

Sagiri took another slow step forward.

"Who," he asked again, quieter this time, "was responsible for making sure the City Lord did not leave the fortress alone?" Nobody answered.

The pressure in the air thickened. Then Nokai snapped out violently from his side with a metallic scream that cut across the fortress entrance. Panic exploded instantly. Soldiers stumbled backward. Spears lowered. Archers above pulled tight on bowstrings as the black blade hovered beside Sagiri with visible killing intent pouring from it.

"Flares!" someone shouted from the wall. A second later, bright southern signal flares burst into the night sky above the War Fortress one after another, painting the canyon walls red and gold.

Alarm horns followed immediately. Footsteps thundered across the battlements as more soldiers rushed toward the gate positions. Sagiri didn't move during any of it. He stood in front of the fortress while Nokai floated beside him like something barely restrained, and his eyes remained fixed on the men ahead.

"Your City Lord was taken beneath your own city," he said coldly. "And yet you are all pretending not to know. Why then do I smell guilt?" By then, even the men on the walls had stopped pretending this situation was under control.

So the majority of them knew the city lord had left the fortress. It must have been a regular occurrence, and even worse, Sagiri knew someone had given him up to the assassins this time.

Sagiri knew that the men in the archive would not die if they did not breathe for just two or three minutes, and a whole minute had just passed. He also knew the men on the wall would not engage until Zifara gave the order. Even so, he knew that someone on the gate must have given intel to someone outside.

That is the person he needed to kill.

Sagiri stood motionless beneath the burning flare light while alarm horns echoed across the War Fortress and soldiers continued flooding onto the walls above. Nokai hovered beside him, humming faintly in the night air as the pressure around the gate kept growing heavier. His eyes moved slowly across the guards in front of him.

"One more question," he said quietly. Nobody interrupted him this time. "Who gave out information that Azir had left the fortress?" The moment the words landed, several faces changed. Small reactions. Brief. But Sagiri saw them immediately. Fear. Hesitation. Realization. Someone opened their mouth to answer...

A violent gust of wind tore across the gate.

Figures landed almost instantly on the battlements above.

The elite.

A second later, the Kai himself appeared on the upper wall. His cloak snapped behind him, and dozens of elite warriors spread across the walls in perfect formation, bows already drawn outward toward every possible threat. The General's arrival had taken less than a minute.

Zifara looked around once. Taking in the situation and searching for the enemy. From the terrified guards, his eyes landed on Sagiri. His expression was one of buzzlement.

"What happened, Chief of N'folu?" he asked. "What is this?" His eyebrows were narrowed.

The entire gate fell silent.

Zifara's question lingered in the air for only a second before Sagiri answered.

"This happened." The Archive suddenly tore open, and nearly two dozen men came tumbling violently out onto the stone before the fortress gate. They hit the ground gasping, coughing, and disoriented from being held within the black space for too long. Some scrambled backward immediately the moment they saw the fortress soldiers surrounding them, while others simply collapsed trying to breathe properly again.

The guards on the walls reacted instantly, lowering their weapons toward the assassins. Zifara's eyes narrowed sharply. Sagiri remained standing at the center of it all with Nokai hovering beside him.

"Azir was taken beneath the city by these men to be killed." His voice was calm now but colder somehow. "These assassins knew he had snuck out of the fortress dressed like that somehow. He could have been dead if I had gotten there a minute or two late." His eyes slowly lifted toward the fortress walls and the gathered soldiers.

"Someone here knew he left the fortress and passed the information to them. Won't you agree with me, General?" Silence followed immediately.

The statement carried so much ice that even Zifara remained silent for a while. Sagiri took one slow step forward.

"I will not leave this place," he said quietly, "until I find whoever did it." The pressure behind those words settled over the gate.

Chapter 320. THE SUPREME CHIEF'S FORTRESS

"Did you have to overreact like that?" Kiuga asked. It had been a day since the incident with Azir. Sagiri was standing at the top of the fortress, looking at the supreme chief's

Sagiri could have just let it go, but the soldiers needed to realize that Azir was a city lord, and they could not just turn a blind eye wherever.

"They needed to know he is not their girlfriend and they need to protect him harder," Sagiri said.

"If I didn't know better, I could say you have grown attached to the boy," N'varu said.

"I merely think his dying and a city lord changing won't be in my best interest." Sagiri defended.

"Whatever makes you sleep at night. Though you don't look to me like you have been sleeping. Every morning, I come to your room and find that girl. I am not going to judge a man for committing a taboo, but..."

"Shut up!" Sagiri snapped his heartbeat, increasing slightly.

"Kiuga is right. She might not have a clan, just like you, as you said, but you will have to marry her if..." N'varu started saying.

"I will kill both if you keep thinking like animals. I would not dare taint a maiden's honour if she is not mine. She is merely scared of sleeping in new places, and she did not take no for an answer." Sagiri sighed.

"Why you? Why did she come to sleep in my bed?" Kiuga whined. "What does the blind boy here have that I don't have?"

"He has honour, and you don't," Kaka's voice suddenly joined.

"But seriously, you don't look like you have been sleeping," Kiuga said.

"I can't sleep. This inner city makes me restless." Sagiri said, looking at the supreme chief's kind of fortresses.

"Why are you looking at that fortress like that?" Kiuga asked, looking between Sagiri and the supreme chiefs' fortresses. "Don't tell me you plan on going into that fortress. You know it is the most protected place in the south." Kiuga said, with his eyes wide.

"Why would you wanna go there? The council will sit for two days." N'varu said. "Then you can ask for whatever you wish, and you can officially be allowed to go into the supreme chief's fortress without a hitch.

"If you go in there, you will surely be caught or get hurt, or even worse, the entire south could turn on you. Didn't you say the city lord's kidnapping was meant to frame you? If you go in there, you will become the enemy of this land. I have never been in there. I might have been able to scramble something together back at the war fortress, but this is stupid. Even then, things still did go wrong." Kiuga said.

"What of the war fortress are you yapping about?" Kaka asked.

"Yes, Sagiri. What is kiuga talking about?" Nvaru asked.

"It's not important," Kiuga said, scratching his head.

"It is when I went to meet Zaira's mother. She was imprisoned beneath the fourth wing for a decade or more." Sagiri said, lifting his wrist to show them a sleeping Zaira from under his cloak.

"Why didn't you ask me to go with you? You know I could..."

"I know. You could also oppose me." Sagiri said.

"I do it because I care about your safety," N'varu said.

"I know. Unlike my mother's shade, I won't let you carry the guilt by watching me die. I won't die so easily. You also don't have to return north this time if you don't wish to. I won't force you to stay far from home. That goes for the others." Sagiri said.

Nvaru looked like he wanted to say something, but remained quiet

"Still...."

"It's okay, I won't get hurt. I have to go into the chief's fortress whether they agree or not. Something in there is making me restless.' Sagiri said, still looking at the chief's fortress.

"Can you wait at least until they sit and talk, or until we gather intel and get a map of the inner place?" Kiuga asked.

"Where could we get a map?" Sagiri wondered.

"Can't you ask the city lord?" Kiuga said.

"No."

"I could know someone who knows. But then I have to send a message or get out of the city. It will take me at least two days or a day and a half if I leave now." N'varu said.

"No. That's not a good idea. You might fall into the same trap as Azir." Sagiri said.

"So much for asking N'varu not to be protective when you are worse." Kaka sighed.

"I won't get caught. I know the South more than you. Even getting out of this city and back won't be a problem. You only have to get me out." N'varu said.

"Fine. Don't die." Sagiri said, turning to Nvaru.

"What do you think it is?" Kiuga asked.

"I don't know. It is like whatever or whoever it is doesn't want me in the inner city. He wants me out. His restlessness is getting to me." Sagiri said.

"Could it be your mother's guardian?" Kaka asked.

"It can't be! They won't dare imprison him in the supreme chief's fortress and residence." Nvaru gasped.

"Yet the more I look at it, the more it looks like a prison. I mean, why could a chief's house be that big?" Kiuga added, and the four turned to look at the fortress even more.

"If he is in there, then it seems he does not want you to go to him," Nvaru said.

"Why then bother allowing his restlessness to be so intense. Won't it just make me want to go get him?" Sagiri said.

"Perhaps he hopes you are wise," Kiuga said.

"Or perhaps he wants me to flatten that fortress."

"That could be." Kaka agreed.

"Definitely not!"

"Absolutely not!"

N'varu and Kiuga said at the same time.

"I will leave toning. Kiuga makes sure he and the Asakana don't come to another agreement." N'varu said. "Sagiri, wait for me to. Wait for the map. Nothing in the south is simple."

Sagiri just nodded, but his eyes did not leave the supreme chief's fortress.

Would he be able to wait for another day or two?"

That was the question.