

KEEPER 321

Chapter 321. THE SITTING

"What does it sound like to you?"

"It sounds like someone is guilty." The general said.

"I have the same perspective. They are going to call it the will of the people." Sagiri said.

"Well, the people's will carries weight." The general said. Sagiri listened again. There had been chantings since the crack of dawn at the gate of the inner city. "The council's sitting will commence today."

"They are still singing praises about me," Sagiri said after a while, and Zifara laughed.

That was completely the opposite. They were chanting something different.

'A southerner couldn't have grown up in the north!

'He must be a northerner wanting to invade our nation again!!

'A scum of the north!!

'He killed my husband!! He must have bewitched the general!!

"The council should not allow him to stay!!...."

"Even a person with no hearing can hear clearly from here." Zifara said. That alone could explain the number of people chanting at the gate. It was still three hours after dawn and pretty early. The number could get fatter and fatter as the day went on.

"I wasn't sure that someone who wanted Azir dead could be in the council, but now I am sure," Sagiri said. Someone must have brought in the fact that he was raised in the north. Up till now, the council had been hiding information about him. Well, it was not exactly a secret, but revealing it now, when the South still hated Northerners, was a rather low blow, and it made things interesting.

"Thank you again for saving Azir." Zifara said. He had been thanking Azir profusely since that day.

"You don't have to thank me. It is what a big brother could do." Sagiri said, shaking his head.

"How did you not kill them?" The generals asked. "I did not take you for the kind type."

"Ask your nephew." Sagiri signed.

"Shouldn't you be getting ready to go to the council. I have a feeling you will suffer a worse fate for the next few hours." Sagiri added, and a humourless chuckle escaped the general's throat.

"I should keep them waiting a little more to add fuel to the fire. I should also mention I was having breakfast with you to make sure the fire burns harder." The general said, and it was Sagiri's turn to chuckle. He could feel the man was now fully supporting him after he saved Azir. At least he could count on one vote of confidence or two, counting Azir's, who would be sitting at the council for the first time with Zifara as his regent. That would be two votes, but considering the two were compromised, the votes would naturally call for more resistance.

"Perhaps you should vote no," Sagiri said.

"That is not a wise decision."

"They will expect you to fight for me. If you don't, then it will make things interesting. Azir should sit this one out, too, and as his regent, you can vote no. Azir's seat is fragile. He can't be seen as weak. Perhaps someone wants to kill two birds with one stone." Sagiri said.

"I'd say three or four birds. Those greedy vultures." Zifara said.

"You'd better get going."

"Don't do anything, rush despite this."

"I am not a patient man, but you should perhaps ask the council how many necks they have," Sagiri said, his eyes still resting on the chief's fortress. The feeling of restlessness and uneasiness he had been getting in the inner city had now narrowed to the chiefs' fortress. Sagiri did not doubt that the feeling's source was coming from the chief's mansion. It had gone from a silent hum to a scream now.

Sagiri listened to the footsteps of the Kai to depart before he tightened his fists and shut his eyes to calm himself. He was already on edge because of that feeling, and now with the noisy chants, he could not calm down. He did not know whether he could keep his cool for long. How dare someone put him in bed with the people who wiped out his clan?

Sagiri did not wish to pursue further the issue of using Azir to flame him, but this... this was just unforgivable.

He opened his hands, and the two black seals appeared on them. He plugged them into his ears to hear nothing of, or he could just send Nokai to shut them up permanently.

"Where are you, N'varu!!" Sagiri groaned.

He had said he would be back in two days. It was now the third day, and someone on the council had pushed the tight buttons to make him impatient. The sitting was going to take the whole day and night, if not longer, according to Sagiri's knowledge of councils. The measuring of manhoods could begin, then doubt, then the plotting would begin. That would only be the beginning.

The supreme chief had to be present at the meeting too. This would be the perfect time for him to break into the chief's fortress.

I will wait for that map for a little longer, then I will go my own way. Sagiri, though peeling himself away from the place. He did not have to walk far before he ran into Azir.

Sagiri did not even take off his seals. He was not in the mood for chatter. He ran into his squad playing some game outside the wing outer room. They must have wanted to say something, but he was not in the mood. He just passed them and shut the door to his room. He had not been hanging around them of late. They could hear the chanting too, and he just let them come up with an excuse for his behaviour.

He did not even manage to shut his door before it was thrown off its hinges. He knew it was Lira before he even turned around.

Sagiri stood at the centre of the room, his jaw tight and his thoughts no calmer than they had been for days. The feeling remained, gnawing at him no matter how much he meditated, trained, or tried to ignore it. When the door opened behind him, he didn't even turn.

"Leave," he said flatly. Lira didn't. He heard the door close and the soft sound of her footsteps entering the room.

"I said leave." Silence. Sagiri exhaled sharply and finally glanced over his shoulder. She was still there, watching him with that stubborn expression he had come to recognize.

"I want to be alone." Still, she didn't move. The room fell quiet until he heard her approaching again.

"Lira."

No response.

"Don't." She ignored that too.

Before he could step away, her arms wrapped around him from behind. Sagiri froze completely. The words he had been about to say disappeared. Lira simply held him, saying nothing, her cheek resting lightly against his back.

Sagiri froze instantly. He should have grown accustomed to the girl invading his space, but this he had not expected...

The silence stretched between them. Sagiri wanted to move away or shake her off, but for some reason, he stood still. Slowly, without realizing it, some of the tension left his shoulders. The restless feeling was still there, but somehow it was faint as if she was blocking it out. The unease had not vanished, but it was now like a distant hum. Standing there with her arms around him, it felt a little farther away than before.

"You're annoying," he muttered after a long while. He felt her smile.

"I am sorry." Is all she said.

Chapter 322. THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Sagiri woke slowly to the warmth of midday sunlight spilling across the room. For several seconds, he simply lay there staring at the ceiling, unusually disoriented. The light alone told him something was wrong. He never slept this late. His body had long ago learned to wake before dawn regardless of how little rest he got. Yet judging by the position of the sun pouring through the windows, half the day was already gone.

He frowned and pushed himself upright. The movement felt strange. He felt rested and refreshed. Sagiri sat on the edge of the bed and tried to remember when exactly he had fallen asleep. The memory refused to come. He remembered coming into his room, remembered Lira entering the room, and remembered telling her to leave. After that, everything became vague fragments.

His eyes drifted toward the empty room. For a moment, he simply sat there, realizing he had slept so deeply that he could not remember the moment sleep had claimed him. The restless feeling that had haunted him for days was still there somewhere beneath the surface, but it felt muted now, distant enough that he could finally think around it.

Sagiri rubbed a hand across his face and exhaled quietly. It was an unsettling realization. He had faced armies, crossed deserts, and survived things that should have killed him, yet somehow a stubborn girl had managed to do what meditation could not. make him sleep.

He was still dressed in his shoes, which showed just how tired he was. He stood up and walked outside. The wing was silent.

Sagiri left his room a few minutes later and stepped into the corridor. The silence immediately caught his attention. Normally, there were guards changing shifts, servants moving through the halls, or at least distant voices carrying from other sections of the fortress. Today, there was almost nothing. The wide stone corridors sat beneath shafts of sunlight pouring through high windows, empty except for the occasional banner stirring in the breeze.

His footsteps echoed softly as he walked. Sagiri paused once, listening, but heard nothing unusual. Just quiet. He continued forward, his cloak shifting lightly behind him as he made his way through the upper levels of the War Fortress. The farther he walked, the more obvious it became that most people were elsewhere.

It felt as though the fortress had collectively moved toward some other purpose. Not particularly concerned, Sagiri followed the familiar route toward the dining wing. If there was something happening, someone there would know. The scent of food eventually reached him long before he arrived, and as he stepped through the final archway leading into the dining hall, the quiet of the upper wing finally began to give way to the sounds of people once more.

It was time for lunch, and the wing was full of elite soldiers of the general. Sagiri entered deep into the dining wing, expecting the usual noise, and immediately noticed Azir sitting near the end of one of the long tables. Azir was at a table alone instead of sitting at a table with Sagiri's squad like he always did.

The City Lord had a full meal in front of him and wasn't eating a single bite. He just sat there staring down at it with his shoulders slumped. Sagiri frowned slightly and walked over.

"Why aren't you eating?" The reaction was immediate. Azir shot upright so fast he nearly knocked over his chair.

"Azir?" The boy immediately stood up so fast he nearly knocked over his chair.

"I'm sorry!" The words burst out of him. Several heads in the dining hall turned. "I'm really sorry, big brother!" His eyes were already watering.

"I..."

"I didn't mean to cause so much trouble! I know you're angry! I know I keep causing problems!" Sagiri stared at him. Azir continued before he could respond. "First, I got kidnapped, then you had to rescue me, then the fortress went into lockdown, then everyone got questioned, and then you stopped talking to me, and I knew it was because I messed everything up!" His voice cracked completely.

"I tried not to go out, but big brother was having trouble sleeping, and I know a place in the outer city that sells good medicine!" Tears were now openly running down his face, making the scene deeply undignified for a City Lord. "Now, Wibo is hurt, and everyone thinks I'm careless, and you hate me?" The dining hall had become suspiciously quiet. Soldiers were pretending not to watch.

They were failing. Miserably.

So that was the reason the boy was out of the fortress? To get him medicine!

Azir wiped at his eyes and looked even more distressed.

"Hate you?" Sagiri wondered, puzzled.

Sagiri stood there for several seconds trying to understand how the conversation had reached this point. Then realization finally dawned. The past two days. His mood. And just in the morning, when he left the roof, ignoring people. Azir had somehow concluded all of it was his fault. Sagiri looked at the untouched meal. Looked at the crying City Lord. Then rubbed a hand across his face.

Azir...."

"I know I'm annoying, but I didn't mean to make your life difficult! They are chanting outside because of me. I am not stupid, I know I caused it." Azir was a mess.

"Azir, listen to me," Sagiri said now with a stern voice.

Azir started to quit crying, but his tears did not stop.

"A man should not cry. A city lord should not cry even more." Sagiri said, and Azir wiped his tears away, trying as hard as possible not to fall apart. It was rather adorable to watch,

"Only a cruel man gets angry at a good thought. You wanted to get me sleeping medication, and you almost died for that. Shouldn't I be the guilty one here?" Sagiri said, and Azir snapped his eyes up. Sagiri was feeling rather rested, and he was feeling even calmer now. He was not at all mad at the boy. He had been mad at first, but he wasn't anymore.

"Big brother..."

"It is true. Now the one on the wrong is the one who harmed Wibon and wanted to kill you. Don't you agree?" Sagiri asked.

"But..."

"No buts. Don't cry so easily. It makes you look...undignifying." Sagiri stopped himself. The boy's innocence was perhaps something that should be protected.

"So you are not mad at me?" Azir asked.

"I will be. If you don't join me to eat with my men." Sagiri said, and Azir lit up like a thousand suns.

Chapter 323. A DISTRUSTION

"I am going into the chief's fortress tonight, whether I have to do it without N'varu's map. I can't wait. I have a feeling things are about to get interesting." Sagiri said.

"I had a feeling you would say that," Kiuga said. It was right after lunch, and the squad headed to the pits. Kaka had said he needed to warm up, and Azir was leading the group, chewing Kaka's ears off at the front with endless yapping.

"The rest of the squad had fallen behind, and they could hear what Sagiri had to say. Kiuga could let Kaka in on the situation later.

"We don't wait for the Kai. We need to know the position of the council so far." Zazarie said.

"The chanting at the gate, I can only guess it is going one way. I also asked the kai to vote no. Whatever the vote. They will not win against me easily. They want to weaken me," Sagiri said, and everyone froze.

"Don't worry. Someone wants to bring him, Azir, and me down together. The decision will not be reached easily, and someone else might just vote yes to get their paws on me." Sagiri said.

"A risky decision," Bukata said.

"It buys me time... I have a feeling something important is in the chief's fortress. I am telling you all this so you don't get blindsided like last time. You deserve to know what I intend to do." Sagiri said.

"You have started to finally consider us your squad," Banga said silently.

"When have I never?" Sagiri said, and everyone shook their heads.

"Don't even get me started. If you hadn't acted on your own back in Galka, you could..." Kiuga started to say, but stopped. Sagiri could tell the topic was hard for Kiuga.

"They could not have stopped coming for me. I will be back north in time to equal the scale. When that time comes, you will need to pick a side." Sagiri said.

"You are not going to let it go?" Kiuga asked silently.

"If someone wiped out your tribe and went after you, would you let it go?" Sagiri asked.

"No. I will make them beg for death and still never grant it as long as I live." Kiuga said in a chilling voice. It was unlike anything Sagiri had ever heard.

"Let's not cross that bridge until the time comes," Zazarie said,

"What do you need?" Kiuga asked.

"A distraction."

"A distraction?"

"Yes. Make sure my presence is accounted for when I'm gone, and more so, no one should realize I am gone," Sagiri said, and Kiuga smiled.

"How big do you want the distraction?" Sagiri was a bit scared of what was running in Kiuga's mind.

"Don't go overboard, but I think we should give Thazir a show."

"What do you say about leaving the city? Well, or trying to?" Kiuga asked, and Sagiri narrowed his eyebrows.

"You don't need to understand. Just leave matters of distractions to me." Kiuga said, still smiling, and sagiri did not ask more. He could let Kiuga do what he did best.

The rest of the evening went by with Kaka sparring in the pits with the other guys. He was holding back as much as he could against Azir. Kiuga had asked him not to show his full strength.

Even though Kaka was still holding back, Azir spent most of his time on his back in the sand pit. Not that Azir looked to mind anyway. He looked like he was having fun being beaten to a pulp. If only he knew who he was sparring against and what he was capable of at full strength. Sagiri was grateful that Kaka was holding back and using about ten percent of his strength.

Lira was now sitting close to him in silence, and Sagiri did not know what to say, so they both sat in silence and watched the others spar.

"Where are you, N'varu!!" Sagiri groaned silently after a moment.

Lira did not answer and just looked at him for a while.

"He will be here. You need to trust him. He is your best friend and loves you most." Lira said after a while, and Sagiri froze. Even so, Sagiri did not reply.

Night soon came, and the crowd at the gate was able to push through the gate into the inner city. They now demanded Sagiri's blood. Soon, they would move to the war fortress. The council sitting was still running, and Sagiri could only imagine how things were going.

Sagiri found himself standing alone on one of the highest terraces of the War Fortress. The city spread beneath him in a sea of lanterns and firelight, beautiful from a distance and increasingly chaotic the closer one looked. His eyes remained fixed on the distant silhouette of the Supreme Chief's Fortress, carved like the mountain.

The feeling was worse tonight. It had come back even more painful. It sat inside his chest like a hook, pulling harder with every passing hour. N'varu had gone searching for answers, for maps, for a way through the impossible defenses surrounding the fortress, and Sagiri trusted him more than almost anyone alive.

That should have been enough. It should have been easy to wait. Instead, he found himself standing there in full gear with Nokai at his side and his cloak already fastened as though his body had decided before his mind had. He wanted to move. Every instinct he possessed screamed at him to go now. Yet another part of him remained rooted in place. The inner city was unstable now. The council would convene soon. N'varu had not returned. If he moved too early, he risked ruining whatever his friend had discovered.

Sagiri closed his eyes briefly and exhaled. He hated this. Hated being trapped between action and patience. Kiuga had left his part of the matter up to him, claiming that he could not stop him, whatever decision he made. Between trusting his squad friend and the urge rooted in him, Sagiri was going mad.

Sagiri's patience finally snapped. His hand tightened around the stone railing, and he took a step forward, fully intending to leave. Another minute. That was all he was giving it. If N'varu wasn't back by then, he would move on his own. The feeling inside his chest had become unbearable, a constant pressure that refused to let him think of anything else.

Then, movement at the outer gate caught his eye. Sagiri froze. Far below, the massive gates of the War Fortress were beginning to open, and a lone figure stumbled through them. The guards rushed forward immediately, voices carrying faintly through the night. Even from this distance, Sagiri recognized him. N'varu. The sand shade looked terrible. Dust covered him from head to toe. His clothes were torn in several places, and he was breathing so heavily that he could barely remain upright. Whatever he had been doing for the last two days had pushed even him to his limits.

Sagiri was already moving.

He stepped from the terrace and dropped.

Wind tore past him as he fell from the upper levels of the fortress, his cloak snapping violently behind him. Soldiers below barely had time to look up before he landed in a crouch on the stone courtyard with enough force to crack the ground beneath his boots. He rose immediately and crossed the remaining distance toward N'varu. For a moment, neither spoke. Sagiri simply looked at him properly. The exhaustion. The dust. The state of him.

Then, for the first time in hours, the pressure inside his chest eased.

Had he left when he wanted to, he wasted all N'varu's effort and missed the reason his friend looked as though he had crossed half the South without stopping.

Sagiri exhaled quietly.

For once, he was grateful he had waited. N'varu bent forward with his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath before finally looking up. A tired grin spread across his face.

"Good," he managed between breaths. "You haven't done anything stupid yet."

Sagiri stared at him.

"I was seconds away."

"Of course you were."

N'varu reached beneath his cloak and pulled out a weathered bundle wrapped in cloth.

"And that's exactly why I ran all the way back. I haven't stopped for a second," N'varu said. "I have to come with you, too. You can't stop me."

"Fine. You watch the tower. If I am not out in two hours, something is wrong." Sagiri agreed quickly that even N'varu paused in surprise.

Chapter 324. BREACH

The archive trembled violently now that Sagiri had finally given in to the feeling inside of him. He pushed out the invisible mass of power, and it ran, swallowing almost the entire inner city before he narrowed it to just the war fortress to the chief's fortress. It had taken him a few minutes to internalize the map. Well, he did not need to remember everything when the archive could. Whatever was in the chief's fortress had called upon the archive, and even Nokai pulsed in the archive pocket.

"Where did you get this map?" Sagiri asked, finally snapping his eyes open. Nvaru's eyes had turned white. Sagiri could only sense calmness from him or nothing.

"After you come out alive. You now owe someone." N'varu said. Of course he did. The map was so old and intricate and looked like a top secret.

"Move close," Sagiri said, and Lira and N'varu moved closer to him. He made sure the archive path was clear from the top of the fortress before he pulled the two into the archive pocket. Sagiri disappeared from his spot and moved quickly within the archive. The movement only took a second before Sagiri landed on the roof of the supreme chief's fortress.

The Archive tore open above the Supreme Chief's Fortress, and Sagiri stepped out onto the roof without a sound. His boots touched the dark stone, and he immediately dropped into a crouch, one hand against the surface as cold mountain wind swept across the high roof. The fortress roof was vast and eerily silent, carved from black stone polished smooth by centuries of weather.

Far below, Thazir glittered like a sea of stars trapped between canyon walls, its lights tiny from this impossible height. For a moment, Sagiri remained still, letting his eyes adjust to the view from so far above. He watched the gate of Thazir from his position. It looked so small and distant from the place where he stood. Even the chants in the inner city sounded distant.

He let the night wind caress his face while his cloak snapped softly behind him. Then he rose and turned. The Archive pocket snapped open. A second later, N'varu stumbled out onto the roof, catching himself before he could fall, followed closely by Lira. The black archive pocket folded shut behind them, leaving the three standing alone atop the highest point of the Supreme Chief's Fortress.

"Well, if I get caught, y'all can jump to your death," Sagiri said.

"Funny. Just make sure you are back in exactly two hours. I don't want to think I only have two hours to live." N'varu said.

Okay, N'varu, fire the flare in the direction of the war fortress if I am not out. It will, but the other time to move back, and you two can find a way to die a less painful death." Sagiri said again before he crouched low, getting ready to go into a place on the map.

"Hope the map is right, or I will end up putting myself in prison." Sagiri's memory merged with the archive's memory.

The map unfolded three times before it reached its full size. Lines covered nearly every inch of parchment. Corridors split into corridors. Rooms concealed other rooms. It was a maze. Entire sections disappeared beneath layers of annotations added over decades. The fortress resembled a living thing more than a structure. Rings of defenses wrapped around the central chambers while hidden routes snaked through the mountain like veins.

There were so many passages that following one with a finger often led to six others. Even N'varu, who had spent days obtaining it, looked annoyed just trying to read it. The Supreme Chief's Fortress wasn't designed to keep enemies out. It was designed to make them lose themselves forever once they got in.

There were too many secrets that the map didn't have. It could have some fourth wing or seventh wing like the war fortress of Tagayia for all Sagiri knew. He had to move around without killing anyone, too.

Sagiri studied the map one final time before memorizing the route. Then the Archive spread silently beneath his feet. Darkness poured across the stone roof, swallowing him whole without a sound.

The world vanished.

He moved within the Archive, gliding through the endless black while following the path N'varu had shown him. Unlike his usual jumps, he couldn't simply force his way directly to the destination. The fortress was layered with defenses and strange distortions that pressed against the Archive from every direction. So he moved carefully.

Several times, he paused, adjusting his course as invisible barriers drifted past like walls hidden beneath the mountain. Then he felt it. The room. The same unsettling pull that had haunted him for days suddenly became stronger. Much stronger. Sagiri turned toward it immediately. The Archive shifted with him. A few moments later, a tear opened in the darkness, and he stepped silently out into the chamber below. His boots touched stone without making a sound as the Archive folded shut behind him, leaving him alone in a dark room.

Sagiri remained motionless for several seconds after stepping out of the Archive, allowing the silence of the room to settle around him. The chamber was dark. The kind of darkness that came from a place rarely visited. His eyes slowly adjusted. Stone walls. Heavy pillars. Shelves. Shapes hidden beneath cloth covers.

Nothing felt immediately dangerous. Yet the feeling that had driven him here pressed against his senses harder than ever before. Sagiri took a slow step forward. Then another. Every movement was deliberate. His boots barely touched the floor as he moved through the shadows, listening.

The fortress felt impossibly empty. Just silence. A silence so complete that he could hear the faint scrape of fabric as his cloak shifted behind him. His gaze moved constantly, examining every corner, every doorway, every object large enough to conceal something. The hairs on the back of his neck refused to settle. It felt as though he had entered a cage.

Sagiri paused beside one of the pillars and slowly turned. For a brief moment, he could have sworn he felt a presence there. Watching him. The sensation vanished the instant he looked directly at it. His hand drifted toward Nokai. Not drawing it. Just resting there. Ready. Then he continued deeper into the room, his breathing steady while every instinct he possessed screamed that something was wrong.

Chapter 325 - 335. THE FORTRESS HISTORY

Sagiri moved slowly. His senses were sharpened now. He was beginning to realize the whole place was a maze. Why did a place where a chief lived need all the twisted turns? Sagiri made sure to remain invisible by walking mostly inside the archive.

He kept to the walls. Somehow, after a few minutes of walking, he was back to where he had landed. He looked around and sighed. Indeed, the map did not even account for all existing entries, exits, and corridors.

This could only mean one thing. Some dead ends were doors, huh.

Sagiri did not have the time for that.

Sagiri abandoned the looping chamber immediately. The Archive unfolded beneath his feet and swallowed him whole before the strange room could pull him back into another circle. He moved downward through the fortress instead, slipping through layers of stone and darkness. The middle levels offered no resistance. Just empty corridors, forgotten chambers, and silent passages buried deep within the mountain. Sagiri crossed them quickly.

After several minutes, he stepped out into an empty chamber deep beneath the fortress. The room was vast and bare, its stone floor untouched and its walls lost in darkness. Sagiri paused in the center. He could feel time slipping away. Every instinct told him that wandering blindly any longer would be pointless.

Time to read your history and make a clear map myself.

Slowly, the black markings covering parts of his body began to move. They crawled across his skin like living ink, flowing along his arm toward his hand. The darkness gathered there, thickening around his

fingers until the markings seemed almost alive. Sagiri lowered himself into a crouch. Then he placed his hand flat against the stone floor and pushed the Archive outward.

The moment the Archive spread through the stone, Sagiri felt his awareness sink beneath the fortress itself. Suddenly, he was no longer standing in an empty chamber. Time swallowed him whole. The mountain around him stripped away, and he found himself watching the fortress being born. Countless hands carved the first foundations from raw stone. Workers hauled blocks through tunnels lit by oil lamps while master builders marked walls that did not yet exist.

Years flowed past in seconds. Corridors appeared where solid rock had been. Towers rose. Chambers were carved. Generations of builders came and went. Sagiri watched armies march through gates that were not yet ancient, saw chiefs arrive and be buried, saw council halls expanded, secret passages hidden, defensive walls reinforced, and entire sections of the fortress torn down and rebuilt. The vision accelerated until centuries passed like breaths.

Thousands upon thousands of lives moved through the mountain around him. warriors, servants, rulers, children, craftsmen, traitors, and heroes. all leaving their mark upon the fortress before vanishing into history. Yet amid the endless change, something caught his attention.

One place remained constant. While walls shifted, towers rose and fell, and whole wings of the fortress changed with the passing ages, this single section never altered. The memory returned to it again and again as though the mountain itself were guiding his gaze toward it. Through all the centuries, through every expansion and reconstruction, it remained untouched and unchanged.

Not even the map N'varu had gotten quite captured the memory of the ancient structure.

So this is how you came to be all these decades. Sagiri's hands bear marks similar to the ones on his body. All the thirteen markings from the thirteen clans, touched by the archive and added with its markings. His tribe's history ran through these walls. Some of the stones he stood on had been laid down by them...

A similar stone to that used in the shadow colonnade in Galka. Deep beneath where sagiri stood, he could hear whatever had been humming and creaming to him. Far, far beneath the fortress. Buried at its core near the foundation of the building.

The flood of memories continued racing past Sagiri until the most recent centuries began to appear. The fortress had nearly become the one he knew today when something suddenly caught his eye. A shape. Familiar enough to make him focus. His attention snapped toward a procession moving through one of the lower levels. At first, his heart lurched.

Myama.

The creature looked so much like Myama that for a moment, he was certain it was him. Then he looked closer. No. It wasn't Myama. It was something larger. A beast bearing the same bloodline, perhaps, dragged through the fortress by chains thicker than a man's arm. Dozens of warriors surrounded it as it fought against its restraints, its roars shaking the memory itself. The memory should have passed.

Instead, it lingered. Sagiri frowned. Then his eyes shifted beyond the beast. There was another prisoner. A man. Shackled. Bound from neck to ankle in heavy chains. His head was lowered beneath the weight of them. Something about him felt familiar. Sagiri focused harder.

The man slowly raised his head. Sagiri froze. He knew that face. Not from the fortress. Not from the South. The man in chains was the very person who had taken him North all those years ago. The realization struck him like a physical blow. The memory trembled around him. His pulse quickened. For days, he had believed the call drawing him toward this fortress belonged to that man. Yet the moment he saw him, Sagiri understood.

The man was not trying to fight. Even his beast was not trying to fight, but was in pain at watching how the man had given up.

koru.

His mother's sandshade looked like he had lost the will to live. This had to be like ten years ago. He, just N'varu, had been hiding his presence. It was as if he did not want to be found.

Sagiri stared at the fading memory before he finally came down. It had only been a few seconds, but it felt as if he had lived through entire lifetimes. He wished he could go back in time and see more of his clan, but he had a feeling he could see them better when he returned to Nkara.

Now then. He had a sound map. Time to move.

Chapter 326. A HELL POOL?

Sagiri smiled before he closed his eyes again. This time it didn't feel like he was a stranger in the fortress. He felt like he had been here many, many times. He felt one with it. They both carried something ancient, and that was something they shared. The archive buzzed in sagiri's veins, coming alive with the aching feeling of familiarity.

Sagiri plunged low into the archive and into its void. He kept falling until he hit that rock. That rock is the same as the one used to build the shadow colonnade. He should have looked at its history, too, back then. He was beginning to get a feeling that the stone being able to block the archive had something to do with the archive. He could feel some life faintly on the other side.

The raging feeling in his heart felt even deeper now. Whatever had been causing the disturbance was under there. Sagiri remained standing on the ledge above a corridor he had landed for another second. Down here, it seemed like no Manny soldiers loitered. It seemed abandoned, yet always walked into. He listened carefully for a while before he lifted from his crouching position and landed the remaining distance. The solid ground made a small noise.

It was indeed a sensitive type of stone. It would block the archive and even give evidence that someone had stepped on it. Sagiri walked along the spiralling corridor until he reached a cul-de-sac. Mmm, that must have the layer that had been added in the last few decades. When the place was first built, there used to be a door there. Sagiri tilted his head. There were three entrances into the place. Now there was only one, according to the history of the building. He did not know the reason for this change yet, but it was time to find out.

Sagiri laid a hand on the cold stone and listened, but there was just silence and the irritating restlessness from the other side. He turned around and started going around. He refrained from using the archive at this point. Even Zaira had stirred again, and her eyes were now open.

Sagiri could feel the four heartbeats as he approached the place. He pushed the archway out and disappeared. One foot in front of the other. came into view a few seconds later. The four guarding the door were dressed in dark grey combat suits with armour on top. They did not look bored, however, and they kept pacing in front of the wide door.

It was not like someone sane could make it this far without a reason. What could they possibly be guarding?

Sagiri walked until he was standing in front of them before he finally materialised.

The four men's movements stopped immediately at the sudden arrival, and they turned to look at the cloaked figure. There was a pause before four blades were unsheathed in unison as the four men fell into a defensive stance.

"Hello, boys?" Sagiri greeted. His face was still hidden behind the long cloak hoodie.

"Who are you?" The one with the most armor-plated on his shoulder spoke.

"That is not important. What is important is that you let me pass through." Sagiri said. He did not have to bicker and fight them, as it could cause a commotion.

"I asked a question."

"Well, I am the chief of N'folu, and as my clan took part in building this fortress, I'd say I have a right to visit the place behind that door. It won't take long.

"Who let you in!!" One of the men stepped beside their man in charge and gritted.

Sagiri sighed. He did not have time to waste.

He pushed the archive out and moved within it. One moment he was standing in front of the four men, and the next moment he was standing behind them. His hand had been pulsing all the while he stood in front of them. He could feel that the door was not made of a specific stone. Even so, it was heavy enough to hide most of the humming sounds behind it.

He would need to hit the door hard enough to break through.

That is exactly what he did. He moved with as much as he could, building his momentum as hard as he could, before he smashed his open palm, now pulsing and glowing with the archive power.

The door shattered and curved inwards and then imploded into a million pieces. The four men barely had any time to react before they had the deafening shutter. They wheeled around only to find sagiri yet to break his stance.

"W-What..."

The man in charge said while his subordinates stood frozen.

"That door weighs sixty lake beasts!" One of the men said when they could finally find their voice.

"Well, I asked you to move and let me through. Look at what you have made me do?" Sagiri finally turns around. His hand was glowing with the marking scrawling all over his body. His plan was a mass of markings pulsing and glowing.

"As I said, I am the chief of N'folu. I am not a patient either." Sagiri said, and the fear in the place rose. The weapons the men had drawn pulsed in their hands.

"P-Please don't kill us. We have a family. I have..."

"Shhh... I am not a monster. I have a family too. I understand what you mean." Sagiri said before he laughed a little. He could feel himself becoming a little sadistic. "Well, you all know I don't have a family because you could not protect my clan and tribe. I am not here to blame you. I, however, have a family member behind this cage. The archive doesn't forget, so you know. If you say a word, I will not let this slide." Sagiri said.

The four men nodded vigorously. Sagiri could hear their bones quacking.

"Now sit down and don't move a muscle until I am back," Sagiri said. "If you tell anyone...." Sagiri lifted his hand dramatically, and the men swallowed in fear and shuddered.

The men with already weakened knees fell forward onto their knees immediately.

"Any more gates?" Sagiri asked, and the man in charge nodded vigorously before handing two keys to sagiri.

"The prison and the hell pool." Is all the man said

Another hell pool?

Sagiri lifted his face finally. He wanted to make sure they saw his eyes before he turned around. The fear could buy him some minutes of an hour. That is all he needed. They swallowed upon seeing his right eye even more, and they sagged even lower onto the floor.

Sagiri turned around and moved.

He was gone at that moment. The place after the gates was dark, mostly with a lit torch in intervals. It smelled dumb and was cold. It was so cold that Sagiri could not imagine a person surviving the place for more than a year.

Chapter 327. RAGE

Sagiri went lower and lower, and just when he thought he could not go any lower, there was still much lower to go.

Sagiri finally reached a gate. This whole journey gave him nostalgia.

The gate was heavy, but it opened quickly. The moment Sagiri opened the gate, he was hit by warm air. A harsh contrast to the cold walls he had just walked through. Sagiri took a step inside, and he finally understood

The prison sat at the edge of a vast underground abyss. Sagiri walked deeper into the place until he was standing at the edge of the dark abyss and looked far below. A pool that stretched so far into the darkness that one could not see where it began could not be seen.

The water was unnaturally still, its black surface reflecting faint ripples he could not have seen if he had not been using his right eye at the moment. Steam rose constantly from the pool, drifting through the air in thick veils that clung to the stone and swallowed distant shapes.

The water itself was warm, almost unnaturally so, filling the cavern with a damp heat that pressed against the skin and made every breath feel heavy. Massive pillars disappeared into the darkness above, their tops hidden beyond sight, while chains thicker than tree trunks hung between them and vanished into the mist. It was clear that they had been used to chain a beast like myama. It was not here anymore, and Sagiri could tell that the beast had passed.

The prison had been carved directly into the cavern wall overlooking the endless water or just the abyss. Black stone cells lined the cliff face in uneven rows, their iron doors stained with age and moisture. How did one even get up there? There had to be a mechanism for bringing the ladders up and down. Even so, Sagiri did not have time.

He pushed the archive out, and the massive invisible structure answered. It concentrated on his feet. The structure hummed as it rose with sagiri until he was standing just over the abyss pool. Galka had one of these, and now this place also had one. The coincidences were getting way too much for Sagiri to ignore.

The cells were not occupied as Sagiri looked from one to another until he reached the last cell at the edge.

How stubborn.

He was sure the man had heard him coming, yet his presence was the same as the pool below. Oddly silent.

Koru'Zalanko

The man sat alone within the cell, his back resting against the cold stone wall as though the prison around him held no power over him. Years of confinement had left their mark upon the chamber, but

remarkably little upon the man himself. His frame remained broad and powerful, almost like the man who had carried him north. The muscles beneath his now weathered skin still carried the strength of a warrior who had once crossed deserts to take him north.

Long silver-streaked hair fell past his shoulders, untamed yet strangely dignified, while a thick beard framed a face carved by hardship rather than defeated by it. Deep lines surrounded his eyes. His wrists bore the scars of chains, and his clothing had long since faded from its original color, yet he sat with quiet confidence.

Or perhaps the silence of a man who had died but still lived. A man who had lost his master and did not have a purpose to live anymore. There was something immovable about him. The years had taken comforts, freedom, and companionship, but they had failed to bend his spirit.

Sagiri could not fathom what he was feeling at the moment, but it was not one emotion. Anger simmered within him, nostalgia, pain, and many feelings he had never experienced to such a level.

What a cruel fate! What had the man done to deserve such a fate? Lost his master then imprisoned.

The South was going to pay for this. Sagiri trembled with rage. How dare they!

They were no better than the North.

The longer Sagiri stared at the man in the cell, the more he felt something inside him crack. For a long moment, he couldn't identify the emotion. Then another followed. And another. Anger. Disbelief. Resentment. Confusion. They crashed together until one feeling rose above the rest. Rage.

Not the hot, reckless rage of battle he had experienced before. Something colder and deeper. The kind that burned every rational thought inside of him. His jaw tightened. The air around him seemed to grow heavier. Without realizing it, his fingers slowly opened at his side.

The reaction was immediate.

The Archive beneath him split apart with a violent shriek. Darkness tore through the chamber, and Nokai exploded from it like a living thing answering a call. The silver blade shot forward with enough force to

split the steam hanging over the pool before stopping abruptly beside Sagiri. It rose vertically until its hilt aligned perfectly with his open hand with a snap. Responding to the fury pouring from him.

The cavern fell silent save for the distant sound of dripping water. Nokai hovered there, humming softly with restrained violence, as though it could feel every ounce of its master's rage and stood ready to unleash it upon whatever target he chose. Sagiri had never hated a place he wished he could call home so much.

Wasn't the man sitting in front of him supposed to be celebrated as a hero?

The archive moved, pushing Sagiri closer to the cell. Sagiri pushed his hoodie back and let it rest on his shoulders. His hand reached out, and the moment he touched the railings of the wall, he felt them.

Those power-sucking string-like things, the ones used in the seventh wing, were laced into the bars.

Sagiri hissed and pulled his hand back immediately.

The man finally moved after sagiri hissed. Slowly, almost lazily, his eyes opened.

Sagiri froze.

They were white. Completely white. No pupils. No visible iris. Just like N'varu's whenever he surrendered himself fully to his clan art. Yet there was something vastly different about these eyes. They held none of N'varu's wildness. No mischief. No youthful arrogance. They were calm. The weight of countless years. His gaze settled upon Sagiri immediately, as though he had known he was there the entire time.

Neither spoke. The steam drifted silently between them while Nokai hovered at Sagiri's side. Moments passed. Then more. Two strangers stared across a prison cell, both knowing they were anything but strangers. The rage inside Sagiri remained. Yet beneath it, something else began to grow.

Calmness.

Silence.

Silence stretched far and wide until finally the man parted his lips slowly.

"You shouldn't have come."

His voice carried an echo across the underground place. His words carried no emotion either. Yet Sagiri could feel that he meant every word.

Chapter 328. FREE

"You shouldn't have come."

His voice carried an echo through the underground. His words carried no emotion either. Yet Sagiri could feel that he meant every word.

Sagiri trembled with rage for a few minutes before he finally paused.

"You think I have a choice?" Sagiri almost snarled.

"Your sand shade did not teach you the importance of staying calm, did he?" The man was not disturbed by Sagiri's outburst. In fact, his energy remained the same. Like a sea of calmness. "I thought someone was here to kill, seeing as how much distress, intent to kill, and revenge you carry around. Even the beast on your hands seems to have grown forcefully because of your distress. You should know rage is not good for it. You will taint it," The man said, his eyes were still white before he finally blinked, and they went back to a normal brown with streaks of pale sand.

"Well, everyone is hell-bent on pissing me off and treating me like a beast," Sagiri said.

"So you act like one?" The man asked again, and Sagiri touched the bars again, but retracted his hand.

"Stay back!" The man warned.

"I am not scared of these stupid traps. I will kill everyone who sets this up."

"You intend to kill everyone who offends you? That is not what a keeper does." The man said, still sitting in the same position.

"A keeper should be accepted by his people and not be pushed to the wall even by his own people. And imprison the man who made sure the bloodline of N'folu still lives." Sagiri said with a cold tone. This time, he placed his hands on the archive and power-sucking threads inside the bars.

Even when they were tempted to suck him dry, he did not move back this time. Koru looked between the lass standing before him and his hands curled on the bars, and sighed.

"Do you plan to kill everyone then?" The man asked his hands, moving from Sagiri's hands to his face and back, but slowly.

"Yes. I will kill them all. I will start with those who imprisoned you here, and then I will kill those who are chanting outside, demanding I leave this place. A place that my ancestors built. I will not be denied even my roots. I was chased in the north and almost killed because I am from the south, and now that I am here, they dare to put me in bed with the people who wiped out my clan?" Sagiri snarled the last part as the power-sucking threads burnt the skin off his hands.

The stupid threads leeching on him, thinking this was his first time.

"Then you will be no better than those who wiped your tribe." The man finally stood up. Sagiri paused before he laughed. A slow, tormented laugh that slowly rose higher and higher until it swallowed the whole place.

Koru tilted his head to the side slowly. The boy did indeed look like his master. The shape of his head and even the colour of his left eye were the same as those of Nathira. Yet, the boy lacked the softness of his mother. How could two people look the same yet be so different?

"Perhaps it's my fate. I don't belong in either the North or the South. I have no tribe and no clan. Who am I to even claim to be N'folu? I haven't even done my last rites for them. I kill people when they never used to. Perhaps everyone is right. I can't escape my fate. Perhaps I deserve to die too. But I won't do it so easily. Everyone who tries to kill me will... die." Sagiri's voice changed from one pain in the last part to a cold one.

Koru, now having listened to the boy, could tell that he was in pain. So much pain, and it made something in him stir. Perhaps he had misjudged him way too quickly. The boy still possessed the strength of his mother, her softness too, but also the stubbornness of his father. Koru could not help but remember that day he had held him as an infant and run north with him for days. Then he had left him with that cowardly soldier running from the massacre. Then, that healer who did not care that the boy was clearly from the south.

That woman with the heart of a lioness and a coward. Somehow, he had seen it as a good choice to leave the last keeper in the hands of a coward and a woman with the heart of a lioness.

Now the boy had also grown to have the heart of that lioness. A careless heart. Koru wished that the boy could have taken a little of that cowardly heart of that man. Perhaps then he could remain in hiding and not come here. The pain the boy carried now could only consume him.

The boy's right eye suddenly turned a bleeding red. A glowing red as he said the last sentence, and Koru shot to his feet.

The boy's hands, however, curled into the bars, and Koru had to step back in that moment.

The moment Sagiri's hands closed around the bars this time, Koru felt something shift. The threads awakened instantly, crawling over the young man's skin and latching onto him with desperate hunger. For a brief moment, the prison seemed to come alive with just the intention of sucking the boy dry.

Then the markings covering Sagiri's body moved. Koru's eyes narrowed. Black patterns flowed toward the boy's hands before spilling from his skin as living threads of their own. The prison glowed instantly and fought them. The ancient restraints that had endured for generations began snapping apart one by one.

A deafening shriek echoed across the underground pool as the bars bent inward beneath his grip. The stone cracked. Ancient runes shattered and snapped before the power-draining threads snapped one after another like overstretched rope. Sagiri roared and pulled. The entire section of reinforced bars tore free from the wall.

Stone exploded outward as the bars came loose. The floating cell shook violently. Then, with a single motion and an angry roar, he ripped the prison gate completely out of the mountain and hurled it away. The twisted mass of metal spun through the cavern before crashing into the darkness beyond the steaming pool.

"Now then, mother's keeper. You are free to come now, you can come and watch me pay your prisoners in full." Sagiri said his eyes were lingering on Koru as he panned slightly.

Silence prevailed as the two men stared at each other. Finally, after a painful, prolonged moment, Koru finally parted his lips.

"So you can now use the echo's eye." He said, looking into Sagiri's eye.

"The echo's eye..."

Sagiri tilted his head to the side, not understanding what the man was saying for a while before he finally understood.

"Your sandshade doesn't know or teach you anything, does he?" Koru said with regret before he stepped forward.

"This eye..." Sagiri said, pointing to his right eye. "Activated long ago."

"That is not good..."Koru went to say, but Sagiri suddenly groaned at the screaming coming from the pool.

"This damned thing can't shut up!" Sagiri said in an irritated tone before he turned around. His eyes fell on the pool below before he jumped down from the floating cell.

Chapter 329. INTO THE ABYSS

Sagiri landed at the edge of the abyss with the pool under.

He did not even hear a sound, but soon Koru was beside him. The man moved even more silently than Nvaru. Even Salka could be envious. He did not even make a sound when he landed. It was as if he were light as a feather.

"You'd better start running. I have something bothering me from this pool." Sagiri said.

"So you have heard it too." The man spoke, coming to stand behind Sagiri.

"It is the reason I came. Seems I have killed two birds with one stone. I had a feeling you were here, but I was going to flatten the south until they gave you up." Sagiri said, and Koru sighed.

"Here I thought you were coming for me," Koru said as if it were a sorry attempt at humour. Silence prevailed as whatever was in the pool called and screamed into Sagiri's bones.

"I have always felt something deep in that pool ever since I was imprisoned here. Its soft humming was comforting, but recently it has been stirring rather violently. Even the pool is not peaceful. Every year, they always come down here and try to find something. Perhaps the archive could know. You must have something to do with its stirring. Something is calling for you." Koru said, looking at Sagiri expectantly.

"I should take a swim and jog my mind. It has the memory of this fortress. It should have something in the pool and that annoying scream." Sagiri said, crouching low at the edge of the abyss.

"You can't!!" Koru suddenly snapped.

"Well, I am good at swimming. And I can't go into the pool. These screams are driving me mad." Sagiri said, tilting his head slightly to look at the man beside him. This was the first time his voice had sounded anything but indifferent, and that had to count as a warning.

"You can't. Every few years, they bring people here and force them to swim, and when they do, they don't come back." Koru said, and Sagiri paused.

So someone knew about a thing deep in the pool?

Interesting!

"Oh," Sagiri said, turning to look at the pool again.

"I don't know anything about swimming, but I don't think you should swim in a pool that swallows but doesn't vomit anyone," Koru said, looking into the abyss.

"How long have people been coming here to take an eternal swim, or should I say, being forced to commit suicide?" Sagiri asked.

"I don't know much about time down here, but I'd say roughly seven years," Koru said.

"Oh," Sagiri said again. His voice echoed silently in the silent underground.

Interesting indeed.

"I am the best swimmer, and I have survived many hell pools before. That reminds me. I have not been able to touch the bottom of the Galka endless pool." Sagiri said his interest piqued.

"Don't tell me..." Koru said, and Sagiri almost saw him move, but he had let his intention leak. To stop him at any cost. Sagiri moved within the archive, disappearing from where two sand palms had landed faster than light. They could have crippled him for sure. If Sagiri had not moved within the archive, he could have been hit.

"If I hadn't been trained by the most silent shadow and deadliest man of the north that I know of. That hit could have crippled me for a few hours." Sagiri said, his lips lifting in an amused smile. He had landed fifty feet away. His hand skidded on the floor of the ground as he came to a stop before standing to his feet.

"If your sandshade doesn't stop you from making stupid decisions, I won't allow you," Koru said, his face hardening. He meant to stop Sagiri at all costs.

"Perhaps you could have stopped me a few years back. Now...."

"Oh?" Koru cut him off.

Sagiri did not even finish talking before Koru disappeared out of Sagiri's line of sight. Sagiri had never seen anyone move that fast or just disappear. This was bad.

Sagiri pushed the archive and moved randomly.

The second he moved, Koru landed on the same spot.

"What were you saying again?" Koru said, and Sagiri could sense his pride below the calmness.

Sagiri landed on a cell above, holding himself suspended upside down by the archive.

"I stand corrected. Here I thought you were a week-old man trapped in this place. My sandshade does indeed have a lot to learn." Sagiri said. This situation kept getting interesting and more interesting.

"You flatter me. That cell could indeed not hold me if I wished to leave. But I hate running. You, on the other hand, can beat me. But not right have activated the echo's eye and the archive, yes, but the two are killing you. Haven't you wondered why your strength drains quickly the stronger you get? The echo consumes its vessel while the archive controls it. Don't get it twisted thinking you're in control." Sagiri's eyes narrowed.

What was the old man yapping about?

"What are you talking about, old man?" Sagiri said.

"The archive was never meant to be put inside a person. When the holder was destroyed, the echo archive was put in you. You are a holder now. You are a holder. Yet you were never meant to be. If you didn't have a keeper's blood running in you. You would have died the moment the archive activated and the moment the echo eye activated." Koru said.

Silence prevailed as Sagiri placed his hand on his chin, trying to think about his doomed fate.

"Seems I am a dead man walking. Why not let me take this swim? I am dead anyway. If I die no one loses. Tagayia wins. Ngaru wins, and everyone is happy." Sagiri said.

"You stupid child." Koru cursed. "Since you have come to this. I can't do anything but teach you to be stronger so you are not a puppet. If the echo archive takes control, then everyone is dead.

"So it's a win-win situation?" Sagiri asked.

"You are more stupid than I thought," Koru said.

"And I hope you know you can't stop me. Let me take this swim, and then I will let you whip me into shape. What do you say?" Sagiri said with a smile, even though there was nothing to smile about. He could not dwell on his misfortunes now, could he? His fate was already bad. It could not possibly get any worse.

"You..."

Sagiri did not give Koru time to reply before he was pushed forward with force like a blade tearing through the air. He smiled as he floated on top of the archive and gave Koru a wide smile.

"Watch my back!" Sagiri said as he plummeted into the abyss.

Koru's eyes widened as he watched Sagiri fall fast.

Chapter 330. THE POOL

The moment Sagiri hit the dark water below, he soon realised why anyone who tried to swim in the wretched pool did not make it out alive. The moment his body touched the water, he knew something was wrong.

There was no splash.

The warm surface simply opened beneath him and swallowed him whole. His body dropped through the darkness far faster than gravity should have allowed. Instinctively, he kicked upward, but the water seized him like a living thing.

The deeper he sank, the stronger the pull became. It wasn't dragging him downward. It was drinking him. The warmth vanished first as the water suddenly became ice-cold. He had always felt calm when underwater, but no. This pool was not peaceful at all.

Above and below ceased to matter. The black water pressed against him from every side, carrying a hunger that made his skin crawl. Sagiri forced his senses outward and immediately regretted it. The pool was not a pool at all. It was a vast wound beneath the fortress, a bottomless abyss hidden beneath a thin surface. Countless currents spiraled through its depths like invisible chains, each one designed to drag anything that entered farther and farther from the world above.

He understood then why no one who entered ever returned. There was no floor to find. No wall to climb. No sense of direction to follow. Every movement only fed the currents. Every struggle carried a person deeper into the endless dark. Even the archive felt distant here, muffled by whatever ancient force slept beneath the water.

For the first time since arriving in the South and after a very long time, Sagiri felt something he rarely experienced. A little fear. He should have listened to his mother's sandshade's advice. Because this place had not been built to imprison bodies. It had been built to erase them.

No matter how much air he had stored in his lungs, it was instantly sucked out. The water sucked him whole into its depths at a speed he had never imagined. The hellpool back at Galka would have wept at how it had been outshone. Sagiri could not push the archer out of breath or even gain control. For a few minutes, he was at the mercy of the pool. He was now disoriented. He could not tell left from right or even if he was dropping low.

The currents suddenly changed. What had been a steady pull became violent. Sagiri felt the water seize him and twist. The darkness around him began to spin. Faster. Faster.

A whirlpool formed somewhere below, vast beyond comprehension, and he was caught in its grip. His body was dragged into the rotation before he could react, and the pressure hit him immediately.

His chest tightened as the last of his breath was torn from his lungs. Water roared past him in complete darkness, carrying him deeper into the abyss. Sagiri tried to fight it. The whirlpool answered by pulling harder.

Did you call me here to kill me? Sagiri thought as his situation worsened. Yet it was about to get even worse.

His ears exploded with pain. The pressure built with every passing second until it felt as though invisible hands were crushing his skull. He clenched his teeth to suppress the pain.

His vision blurred suddenly, and he could feel his consciousness slipping away. For the first time in years, his instincts screamed a simple truth at him.

He was going to die.

He was going to get crushed and drowned in a darkness so deep that no one would ever know where he had fallen. Another surge of pressure slammed into him at that moment, making his teeth rattle in his skull. His ears rang violently. Black spots swam across his vision. The currents tightened around him like chains and dragged him even deeper into the endless void below.

Then, just as Sagiri reached his limit, everything suddenly stopped. Right when he thought it was over for him and his was fading away, there was suddenly deafening stillness. The currents vanished, and the whirlpool disappeared. The crushing pressure that had been threatening to tear him apart simply ceased to exist.

One moment, he was being dragged toward death, and the next, he was floating motionless in absolute silence. His body drifted weightlessly in the darkness, limbs hanging loose as he struggled to understand what had happened. His lungs burned, and his vision flickered at the edges.

He could feel consciousness slipping through his fingers. Yet the pool no longer seemed interested in claiming him. The water around him had become perfectly still.

It was as though the abyss itself had suddenly decided he had gone deep enough. Sagiri floated there thousands of feet beneath the fortress, suspended in a darkness so complete that even his senses struggled to grasp it. The silence felt endless.

His heartbeat slowed. The pain in his ears faded into a distant ache. For a brief moment, balanced between consciousness and oblivion, Sagiri simply drifted. No longer falling. No longer fighting. Just floating alone in the heart of the abyss while the black water held him gently, almost carefully, as though he had imagined what had just happened.

Sagiri dared not move as he feared that any moment would trigger the pools again.

"What a mass of violent water.

Sagiri let himself drift lower and lower, but more slowly this time. Anyone could have already died from the mere force of the whirlpool. Anyone could have been torn into a million pieces, ground to powder, but the archive had shielded his body, and even with the air sucked from his lungs, he was very much alive.

"Sagiri let the silence hold him for a while, letting himself fall.

Suddenly, however, something touched him. Sagiri's right eye snapped open instantly. For a moment, he had been floating motionless in the silent abyss, his fading senses straining against the darkness.

Then he felt it again.

A cold brush against his arm. Another around his leg. The darkness surrounding him was moving. Long tendrils of blackness emerged from the water itself, so dark they seemed to devour what little light existed. One wrapped around his wrist. Another coiled around his waist. More followed.

They came from every direction, drifting through the abyss without a sound or ripple, winding themselves around his body with an almost unsettling gentleness. Sagiri tensed and tried to move, but his limbs felt distant and heavy. The tendrils continued climbing, swallowing his legs, his torso, and his arms until only his head remained free. There was no violence in their grip, no malice, only an undeniable certainty.

Sagiri had given up on trying to fight the pool or anything within it, but he still fought. It was futile, however.

More darkness gathered, weaving itself over him until he could no longer tell where the water ended, and the shadows began. Then, just before the last opening closed, Sagiri caught sight of a colossal shape far below, something vast enough to make the abyss itself seem small. The darkness folded over his face a heartbeat later and swallowed him whole.