

KEEPER 331

Chapter 331. MEMORY

Silence.

There was no time or any feeling then...

Sagiri felt something far more terrifying.

It began as a pressure inside his head. A faint ache behind his eyes. Then it grew. Memories he had carried his entire life started shifting and rearranging themselves. It felt as though invisible hands had reached into his mind and begun turning pages he didn't know existed.

Faces he had forgotten suddenly became clear. Moments he had never experienced flashed through his thoughts with impossible familiarity. The sensation was agonizing. Every instinct screamed that something was wrong.

That his mind was being altered. Yet beneath the fear was a certainty that these memories were not foreign. They had always belonged to him. They had simply been buried. Locked away somewhere beyond his reach.

Then the Archive reacted. For the first time in his life, Sagiri felt it awaken completely. The darkness he had always commanded was suddenly too vast to comprehend. It expanded beyond him in every direction, no longer feeling like a technique or gift but a living world connected to something ancient and endless.

He felt corridors of memory stretching across centuries. Countless lives. Countless voices. Entire histories flowed through the darkness like rivers. The Archive broadened until it seemed large enough to contain mountains, cities, generations, and forgotten ages. The markings covering his body erupted with movement, spreading across his skin as though responding to a call older than civilization itself.

Pain lanced through every nerve of his body so raw that he could have died if he had a choice. His heart hammered in his chest. His vision fractured into a thousand pieces. Yet alongside the agony came understanding.

The Archive had never truly belonged to him. He belonged to it. And now, deep beneath the fortress, standing at the source from which it had been born, the Archive was finally remembering what it had once been.

The darkness swallowed Sagiri completely, and suddenly, he was no longer beneath the fortress. He was somewhere older. Far older. The vision unfolded around him like a forgotten dream. Mountains stood where no mountains existed today. Rivers flowed through lands that had long since become desert. Then he saw them.

Five tribes standing together beneath a sky untouched by history. Not four. Five.

Five?

The ancestors of the South. Each gathered around a vast black pool that stretched beyond the horizon, its waters calm and endless. The pool was not beneath the fortress then. The fortress did not yet exist. Instead, the pool sat at the heart of the world, and from it flowed the gifts that would shape the tribes.

Around the pool stood five ancient relics, each resting upon a stone altar. A golden spear crowned with shifting grains of crystal sand. A horn carved from the skull of a colossal beast. A hammer forged from black metal veined with living stone. A silver mask whose surface reflected paths that did not exist. And finally, a blade of pure darkness that seemed less forged than born from the shadows beneath the water. The relics radiated power unlike anything Sagiri had ever felt. Ancient. Sovereign. Alive. The moment his eyes fell upon them, recognition stirred within him. These were the voices that had haunted his dreams. The distant calls he had felt since arriving in the South. They had been calling to him all along.

Sagiri watched as one tribe learned to command sand, another mastered beasts, another forged bonds with stone and metal, while the fourth learned to walk paths hidden from ordinary eyes. Then his gaze settled upon the fifth tribe. They stood closest to the water.

Closest to the darkness.

Black markings crawled across their skin like living ink, and when they moved, shadows followed. The Archive. It had always belonged to them to protect. Well, he knew that much already. The pool and the Archive were the same, connected like two parts of a single living thing.

The vision shifted. The relics vanished from their places and appeared in the hands of five rulers standing before the tribes. Their voices echoed across the ages, speaking words Sagiri somehow understood. A treaty. An oath binding the five tribes together beneath a single banner. The relics were not merely symbols of authority. They were keys. Anchors of power are entrusted to each tribe. It was said that should the treaty ever break and the South fall into division, only a true ruler could unite the relics once more and wield all five. Such a ruler would command the legacy of every tribe and stand above kings, chiefs, and warlords alike.

Then Sagiri saw it.

A creature sleeping beneath the pool.

Vast beyond comprehension.

Its body stretched through the darkness beneath the world itself. Eyes like moons watched from the abyss while countless memories flowed through its form like rivers. The Beast of Memory. Guardian of the pool. Keeper of the relics. When the treaty shattered, and the tribes turned upon one another, the beast had taken the relics into its care, hiding them from the world until a worthy ruler appeared.

He watched centuries pass. The tribes flourished. Cities rose. Wars were fought. Alliances shattered. Then something changed. Fear. The fifth tribe had grown too close to the darkness beneath the pool, drawing upon powers the others neither understood nor trusted. Old friends became enemies. The vision fractured into battles, betrayals, and burning settlements. The fifth tribe dwindled. Generation after generation vanished until only fragments remained. Their name was erased. Their history is buried. Yet the Archive survived, passing from one descendant to another like an ember refusing to die.

As the vision faded, Sagiri understood something that sent a chill through him. The pool beneath the fortress was not merely connected to the Archive. It was its source. The Beast of Memory still slept within its depths, guarding the five relics and waiting for the one destined to claim them. And somewhere in the forgotten past, the people who carried the Archive had once been the fifth tribe of the South.

What happened to the fourth tribe?

Sagiri found himself asking inside his head.

The beast of memory finally turned towards him, and Sagiri wished he had not asked.

Chapter 332: MYSTERIES

The pressure inside Sagiri's mind intensified. The visions around him faded into darkness once more, yet the knowledge remained. Then, without warning, an answer appeared within his thoughts.

You have met two of the Fourth Tribe. They died before the Fifth.

The meaning struck him immediately.

Had he met two?

The Fourth Tribe. The tribe of hidden paths and unseen roads. The tribe that had vanished from history before the Fifth was finally erased.

More knowledge settled into Sagiri's mind.

N'folu broke the first oath.

The vision shifted. He saw the five tribes gathered beneath the treaty banners, then saw cracks spreading through what had once united them.

The Fourth Tribe did not leave the South willingly.

Ancient cities flashed before him. Arguments. Accusations. Fear.

N'folu feared the roads between worlds.

The silver masks of the Fourth Tribe appeared again.

They feared what they could reach.

They feared what they could discover.

The memories accelerated.

The Fourth Tribe was cast out before it departed.

Its history was erased before its people vanished.

Another truth followed.

Only the Fourth Tribe could follow the Fifth into the Archive.

Only the Fourth Tribe could hunt the Fifth, where others could not.

The words felt heavier now.

The treaty was designed that way.

Sagiri saw the five relics once more.

The Fifth guarded memory. The Fourth guarded paths. One could always find the other. The final truth settled into his mind like a stone sinking into deep water. If the Fifth Tribe ever turned against the treaty, the Fourth was its executioner.

If the Fourth betrayed the treaty, the Fifth was its jailer.

Then the darkness grew still.

Only the Fourth Tribe can truly kill the Fifth.

"I see, so N'folu is not innocent after all? Centuries ago, before they became peaceful they had first broken the treaty by being at odds with the fourth tribe? But who could blame them, right? No one can be happy knowing someone is out there who can kill them.

"A mistake I had ignored, thinking the unity could always last," the memory filled sagiri's mind. "The Sekana was meant to keep the N'folu in line, so there was a balance. Many already thought you were my favorite, but I, in fact, had given you a big responsibility."

"So we could say it was karma for the N'folu to be wiped out?" Sagiri said.

"Far from it?"

The next words to fill Sagiri's mind had him frozen, and he could not move.

"Impossible!" Sagiri snapped. Whatever the stupid beast of memory had said had to be a lie.

"I can not lie. I live in the memory of the archive. Lying is impossible to me."

Sagiri wanted to laugh, but far from it that he could laugh at such a cruel joke. He now, more than ever, could not help but feel hot, burning rage.

"So then I am either going to die by a Southerner's hand," Sagiri asked.

"Yes." There was no hesitation.

"How interesting.

"But your death will bring more harm than good. So I merely remind you of the memory the archive does not have. But before that... a war is coming. Neither the South nor the North will win this war."

A memory seared through Sagiri's head that had him frozen completely. It was even worse than what the beast of memory had said. This time, Sagiri did not even have the strength to react. As he watched could happen if things went the most likely way now.

The vision changed again. Sagiri suddenly found himself staring down upon the entire ribs of the north and south. Then destruction swept across it. The South burned first. Great canyon cities collapsed into oceans of fire while ancient fortresses shattered and disappeared beneath storms of sand and darkness.

The North followed. Mountains split apart, glaciers broke free, and kingdoms vanished beneath avalanches large enough to bury nations. Then the East. Endless forests burned from horizon to horizon while great beasts fled through dying lands and entire cities crumbled into ash. The West suffered no less. Oceans rose to consume coastlines, fleets burned across black waters, and islands sank beneath monstrous waves.

Everywhere he looked, there was ruin.

Armies annihilated.

Tribes erased.

Bloodlines extinguished.

Centuries of history reduced to smoke and rubble in moments. The world itself seemed to be dying. Vast cracks spread across continents while the skies darkened and the seas churned in fury.

He should never have entered the wretched pool.

"No one gets to wipe out the north before I get my revenge," Sagiri said.

"Yet there will be no one left to die by your hand if you keep being short-sighted. After you take all these relics, this pool, and I will cease to exist. I only stayed long enough to tell you what you have been seeking. You have my heart inside of you. You will become the rightful ruler of the south. I will have solved your problem. Now you will solve mine."

"Now then, let's begin...."

Koru stood at the pool after the lass went. He watched the pool stir once before it was silent. He watched the abyss from above for a second, then a minute, and an hour... he two.... He could no longer watch. He did not know how long the archive could hold, but he knew he could not wait any longer.

And so he jumped into the pool. Well, he tried to. Before he could even touch the water, a force struck him back so hard he was thrown out and back to where he had stood before he jumped.

It was as if the pool itself was alive, and I was rejecting him.

That did not stop him, however, and he tried again and again and again. The result was the same, but each time he tried, the force resisting him grew harder. He scored a mouthful in his sixth attempt. This was bad. He did not have long to get out of there either, but he was not going to leave without the boy.

Perhaps he should have tried harder to stop him.

Chapter 333. BROKEN PLANS

The two figures on the fortress roof paced on the slanting edge again and again. They had been doing that for a few hours now. Nvaru was one of them. N'varu hated waiting when it mattered. When it was his master's life at risk.

He hated it an hour ago. He hated it now. He would probably hate it an hour from now, too. Yet he remained seated on the cold stone on the roof, his eyes fixed on the ground where Sagiri had disappeared. At first, he had expected him to reappear within minutes. Then an hour passed. Then another.

The silence became unbearable as the night deepened around them. Lira had fallen asleep at some point, curled against one of the pillars after exhaustion finally claimed her. N'varu remained awake. Now and then, he would rise and pace along the edge of the pool before returning to the same spot.

"You know," he muttered toward the sky, "if you die after making me wait all night, I'm bringing you back just so I can kill you myself." Before he collapsed beside Lira, who had sat at some point.

Then stood again.

Then paced some more. Hours passed. The night grew colder. Beside him, Lira remained unusually quiet, her eyes fixed on the darkness below as though she expected Sagiri to emerge at any moment.

He didn't.

The city lights gradually dimmed as the deepest hours of the night settled over Thazir. Still no sign of him. N'varu tried convincing himself that this was normal. Sagiri vanished into dangerous places all the time. Sagiri did impossible things all the time. Yet as the hours stretched on, the confidence became harder to maintain.

More than once, he walked to the edge of the roof and stared down toward the fortress below, wondering if he should go after him despite knowing he had absolutely no idea where to start looking. Eventually, the eastern horizon began to lighten.

The stars faded one by one eventually, and with each fading one, Nvaru sighed. He had never dreaded dawn so much. Dawn crept across the canyon walls and painted the city beneath them in pale gold. N'varu rubbed his eyes and let out a long breath. An entire night had passed. Sagiri was still gone. Beside him, Lira remained seated exactly where she had been hours earlier, watching the growing daylight in silence.

Damn it!! Kiuga's plan won't work when the day comes.

The first sitting must have ended a few hours ago before dawn, to allow the council to rest so they could sit again. If Nvaru could guess right at the moment Zifara was back in the war fortress, the first phase of

the plan was to make sure Zifara could not find out Sagiri had left the fortress. That also involved Lira being absent.

It was a wicked plan indeed. N'varu did not tell Sagiri about it because Sagiri could have denied it, but Lira did not seem to mind.

Sagiri would be sharing his room with Lira in the manner of a man and a woman, the whole night. A taboo, but not unheard of, for young people who plan to marry. Only Sagiri was not aware. The plan could not work once it was morning.

Now, then the second plan would be in motion. Plan B. They could say Sagiri left early in the morning. Lira had to be present for his part of the work. She had an account for him by acting weirdly. She always acts weirdly, but this time, she would have to take it up a notch to sell the story.

Then comes the third plan, where Kiuga would have to act like Sagiri. Sagiri is always covered. These three plans could not work if a person were observant. If they had to use plan C, then they had already failed. Right about now, half the squad could be at the gate behind the barricade, arguing that they belonged in the south and they would not leave. If nvaru could guess, the crowds would be growing at the moment.

As the first edge of the sun began to creep over the distant canyon walls, N'varu's thoughts finally turned against him.

Until now, he had managed to stay busy. Pacing. Complaining. Checking the map for the hundredth time despite having memorized it days ago. Anything to avoid thinking too hard about the fact that Sagiri had vanished into the most heavily guarded fortress in the South and had not returned.

Now there was nothing left to distract him.

The sunlight grew stronger.

Sagiri was still gone.

N'varu folded his arms and stared at the city below, his jaw tightening. His mind immediately supplied an explanation. Maybe Sagiri had been discovered.

No.

Discovered wasn't the right word.

Caught.

Surrounded by hundreds of guards. The entire fortress was turning against him. Then his imagination made it worse. The Supreme Chief himself appears.

The thoughts came faster.

What if Sagiri had found whatever had been calling him, and it had turned out to be a trap? What if the thing had been waiting specifically for him? What if it wasn't a person at all? N'varu hated that one. His fingers drummed against his arm. The more he thought about it, the less he liked it.

Sagiri was never late. Well, not this way.

If Sagiri said he would return, he returned. Sometimes bleeding. But he returned. The fact that he hadn't was what bothered N'varu most. His eyes shifted toward the war fortress, and a knot formed in his stomach.

For the first time since meeting Sagiri, he found himself wondering what would happen if the impossible occurred. What would happen if Sagiri didn't come back? The thought hit harder than he expected. He immediately tried pushing it away. The South and inner city were already unstable. The chiefs were divided. Enemies were moving in the shadows.

N'varu exhaled slowly.

The sun finally broke above the horizon. Golden light spilled across the rooftops of Thazir. Beside him, Lira remained silent.

Chapter 334. BROKEN PLANS II

The eye contact was getting unbearable for Kiuga. It was four hours after dawn, and as you can imagine, things had gone from bad to worse. He had never been in this corner when the central piece in his strategy was missing.

Sagiri had not come back, and N'varu and Lira were stuck on the roof of the chief's fort, hiding as much as they could, but the roof was not meant for people to stand on. They would soon burn to death under the sun if hunger did not kill them first, or just the cold. That was not the only issue, however. Bukata, Zazarie, Maita, Zolinka, and Ulekai had been captured and were under the council's prison.

Well, things had gone totally wrong. Yes, Zifara had voted no and voted in the city lord's place a no. It was a risky situation, and he might have saved his head and Azir's, but that had made everyone who meant to bring him down angry. way more angry, and they needed to vent that anger on someone else.

"Are they really in his chamber? You want me to really believe he could just sit around and watch his people get imprisoned while he lies with a woman?" Zifara asked again, and Kiuga kept that long eye contact.

"He is still a young man. What can I say? His stamina is something even I have to commend." Kiuga said, and he knew if it were not for how tight the situation was, Kaka could have beaten him to a pulp. He said all this, holding the creepy eye contact he had been holding.

He was no such good liar, but holding the unnecessary eye contact could at least help them buy time. Even a few minutes could mean something important. He could not proceed with plan B because the inner city was in flames now. The people were now camping outside the war headquarters, demanding the death of Sagiri and demanding that Zifara bring them out.

"So ask him to come out, or I can go in and usher him out. We have a lot to discuss." Zifara said clearly no, believing whatever Kiuga had to say

"So the council wants him dead?" Kiuga asked. Kaka was standing beside him, and for the first time, the boy did not roll his eyes or say a snarky remark. Even he understood that they were about to die. Even Zifara would not be able to defy the will of the people and the will of the council both at the same time.

"This is the third time you have asked this question. If you are hiding something, this is the right time to tell me. My head is currently on the chopping block, and I have less than two hours to bring him out." Zifara said.

"So there will not be a second meeting?" Kiugav asked. "Don't you think this is hasty?" Kiuga asked with a tight, sheepish smile on his face. He looked like he was mentally ill at the moment, which he probably was.

Sagiri, where are you? He screamed silently. You'd better do your late dramatic arrivals now!!

"I told him that me voting no would be a risky situation, and it seems those foxes want him dead now more than ever because of another reason. Between using him to further their means and going against enemies in the shadows in the council, they have decided to join hands against a weaker opponent.

"And they think Sagiri is a weaker opponent?" Kiuga let a laugh escape his throat this time. "Are they eager to die?" Kiuga asked.

"Well, whatever he planned to do after I voted no and pushed him into a corner, he'd better do it now unless he plans to wipe out everyone." Zifara said.

"I am not going to lie, Sagiri is unpredictable, but if there is one thing I have known from being with him for these years is that he won't forgive anyone who harms his friend. If the council dares harm those five, he will not leave one stone standing in the inner city. Even in the outer city. His anger is what you could call irrational." Kiuga said.

"Is that a threat?" Zifara said.

"Take it however you wish. You saw him at the gate. He can not be reasoned with when people he cares about are harmed. Perhaps that is his weakness and his strength." Kiuga said.

"So it is a threat," Zifara said, lifting her head.

"I am only asking you to delay the council as much as possible. If he doesn't show up by sundown, I will go out there and take his place." Kiuga said, lifting his head, and Banga gasped beside him. Kaka breathed a shallow breath, but he still held the pride he always wore.

"So then you admit that Sagiri is not in his fortress," Zifara asked, his voice carrying an edge.

"You are a smart man. You know he can't sit still. He went out last night, and all I have been doing till this moment is all instruction from him. I won't hide him from you anymore, but he was supposed to be here right now, but as you have guessed." Kiuga said.

"So I guess this is the moment you strike a bargain with me."

Zifara said, and Kiuga held that smile he had been holding.

"Sagiri saved the city lord from death. Now his friends are facing death. I think it is time you paid that debt. You owe him a life for a life. I know I sound cruel, but I love those men like my brothers. I have to do what I should do as a future general. If you let them be harmed before sundown today, or either of us, Sagiri will forgive you. It doesn't matter that you didn't take the vote because he asked, but he will not compromise if his friends are dead. So Kai of the south...." Kiuga said before he moved a step back and threw himself to his knees.

Kaka and Banga did not hesitate before they did the same.

Chapter 335. BOUGHT TIME

"I plead that the Kai of the south give us more time. Return the good with good that Sagiri did." Kiuga said, slapping his fist to his chest. Well, this was not a part of his plan, but things had gone completely south, and right now, even he could not do much about the situation but buy time and hope that Sagiri was not dead and he could show up.

He had even come for them in the Boni valley. He won't fail this time. He won't die that easily, could he?
"I should have stayed away from this matter." Zifara cursed under his breath.

"I ask that you delay this matter until sundown. You are a man with resources, and you can." Kiuga pleaded.

"We ask that you delay this matter until sundown." Banga and Kaka said in chorus behind Kiuga.

"Zifara stood there for a moment, his hand resting on his weapon as if he was contemplating whether to kill the three or kill himself, before he sighed.

"What if he is not back by sundown?" Zifara asked.

"Then, as you can see, I am dressed like him. Most people don't know him or his face. I will take his place and die." Kiuga said.

"You already said if you all die, he will wipe out the city?" Zifara said.

"He will be back before then. We all have our roles to play. I will write a note only for those who can understand, explaining how hard you worked to keep us all alive." Kiuga said.

"So I will save my own skin and let everyone die." Zifara said.

The situation was getting harder and harder for everyone, and Kiuga was a little wicked. He knew that Zifara could not let the city be wiped out, and helping them at the moment was inevitable. Asking him to pay a debt was giving the man some face.

No matter what he chose, now this was a lose-lose situation. If he bought time and sagiri did not come back, then it was futile. They were all going to die, and Sagiri could not be held back by a mere note. If everyone were dead, then even Zifara could not be a general of corpses. The worst was that the crowd did not understand who they were dealing with, and neither did the council. They perhaps had heard rumours, but they did not fully understand Sagiri. He was the worst when he did not have anything to lose.

"He will be back before sundown. I know it. If he is late, it will only mean something of importance is holding back." Kiuga said.

"More important than everyone dying?" Zifara sighed.

"So you are not really going to tell me where he is, are you?" Zifara said.

"I dare not. It will only make things worse for everyone. Besides, you will soon find out." Kiuga said.

"Okay, fine. I will hold the execution of your friends and yours till sundown. If he isn't back by then, you know my hands are tied." Zifara said.

"Thank you, General. We will be indebted to you for life for this life." Kiuga said, a nervous smile taking over his face.

It is now or never, Sagiri. You better not be dead.

"Don't thank me yet, but you can tell me who raised you. I don't for one second believe you are from Tatani. Your manner of speaking and making strategies is unrivaled by many." Zifara said, and Kiuga froze. Had he outdone himself that much?

"My father was a general. A retired one, and he taught me everything I know. Rest his soul." Kiuga shook his head and added a dramatic pitch to his voice as he spoke the last words.

At this, Kaka could not take it, and Kiuga could hear him mutter

"shameless" under his breath, but kept his head lowered.

"He must have been a great general of..."

"Safaya. He is from Safaya. They met with my mom during the last war between Tagayia and Safaya. My mother is from Tagayia." Kiuga continued holding that grieved voice, and he was surprised that Kaka had not punched him yet.

"Shameless.., ridiculous," Kaka muttered.

"I see. May their souls rest in peace. You may stand. No wonder that N'folu keeps you close." Zifara said with a strong voice, only that of a warrior who had seen his friend die time and time again.

"If I am to help you, then I need you to do something for me?" Zifara said as the three rose to their feet.

"You need to keep acting like him," Zifara said. Kiuga had been dressed like Sagiri all day, but Zifara had just caught him at first glance and asked where Sagiri was, so plan B did not even take motion. The man could even tell who someone was by looking at their shadow. He was not a man to be trifled with.

"As you wish. What do you need me to do?" Kiuga asked.

"Go stand on the roof where everyone can see you," Zifara said before he turned around to leave.

Five hours after dawn, Kiuga stood alone upon the edge of a rooftop overlooking the inner city. Wrapped in Sagiri's cloak, his face hidden beneath the shadow of the hood, he looked enough like the real thing that anyone watching from below would be convinced.

The city beneath him was in turmoil. The broad avenues of the inner district were packed with people chanting for Sagiri's death. The hood concealed most of his face while the cloak hid his frame. Below him, the city had descended into chaos. The broad streets of the inner district were packed with people. Nobles, merchants, warriors, and common citizens alike filled the plazas and avenues between the council halls and lordly estates.

Angry banners waved above the crowd. Voices merged into a deafening roar that echoed between the stone buildings. Kiuga watched groups pushing toward the council district, pointing toward the fortress and shouting demands. Some called for arrests. Others demanded executions. More than once, he heard Sagiri's name carried by the wind, followed by curses and accusations.

Every faction seemed to have its own version of the truth, and all of them wanted someone to blame.

Armed warriors lined the streets in an effort to contain the swelling crowds, but even from the rooftop, Kiuga could see their discipline fraying. The tension hanging over the city felt like a bowstring stretched to its limit.

One wrong move and the entire inner city would erupt. Kiuga rested a hand on the rooftop ledge and looked down at the sea of furious faces. For the first time since putting on the disguise, he was beginning to understand just how much trouble Sagiri had managed to accumulate in a remarkably short amount of time.

He could not imagine being on the receiving end of such hate from his own people.

Poor Sagiri.

Somehow, the scene made his heart ache.

Perhaps killing them all won't be such a bad idea.

Chapter 336: BORROWED TIME

Kiuga remained where he was as the hours crawled by, watching the unrest swell like a living thing. What had begun as scattered gatherings had become a flood. Every street visible from the rooftop was packed shoulder to shoulder with people. Balconies overflowed.

Windows were thrown open.

Rooftops held spectators and agitators alike. The chants rolled through the city in waves, rising from one district before being taken up by another until the entire inner city seemed to be speaking with a single voice.

Death. Death. Death.

Kiuga knew the words weren't directed towards him, but as the hours went by, he had grown more and more depressed just listening to the hate. The hate had grown so thick he could smell it and even touch it. So the north had spied on him, and his own people would dare put him in bed with the same people who tried to kill him.

"You unlucky child." Kiuga sighed, feeling that an emotion was not allowed to have. He wanted to wail and cry at the injustice. A tear built in his eyes, but he remained still. He would not ruin Sagiri's image by even raising a hand to wipe a tear.

The word echoed endlessly between the stone walls. Some sang it. Some shouted it. Others beat drums and metal plates to its rhythm. Banners demanding executions hung from buildings while crude effigies swayed above the crowd. Warriors struggled to keep order as more and more citizens poured into the streets, but the tide had long since grown beyond anyone's control.

From his vantage point, Kiuga could no longer find a single plaza, avenue, or courtyard untouched by the chaos. Everywhere he looked, there were people. Angry faces. Raised fists. Voices hoarse from hours of chanting. The city seemed to have forgotten everything else. Trade had stopped. Markets stood abandoned. Even the council district was surrounded by a sea of bodies pressing against every barrier. Looking down upon it, Kiuga had the unsettling impression of watching a giant beast slowly awaken beneath the city. The anger had become too large to belong to individuals anymore. It belonged to the crowd itself now, feeding upon its own momentum and growing larger with every passing hour.

At the moment, the council was in as much trouble as Zifara was. They were both now the enemy of the people. If it persisted without bringing out Sagiri, then things were only going to go from bad to worse. They would be lucky if the inner city districts were not torn to shred themselves by the time it was nightfall.

"Where are you, Sagiri? I don't even want you to come out and see this. You should just come with me to Lofekeni so I can marry you off to my sister." Kiuga lamented, and Kaka snickered from behind him.

"Don't even ruin Sagiri's image by saying stupid nonsense," Kiuga said from a position far back where he had been standing with Banga, conveniently out of sight.

Kiuga watched the sun sink toward the horizon and knew things were getting out of hand. The inner city had been bad enough, but now the unrest was spreading outward. From his position atop the roof, he could see fires being lit across the lower districts as more people poured toward the center of Thazir.

The chants had not died. They had multiplied.

Every hour brought new rumors, new accusations, and more anger. It was as if someone was fanning them himself to make sure there was no end to it.

The streets below were packed shoulder to shoulder. Even the outer city had awakened to the crisis. The noise carried all the way to the rooftops was a constant roar of voices demanding answers, punishment, and blood. Kiuga exhaled slowly and looked toward the distant fortress. Barely an hour remained until dusk. That had been the agreement.

The General had delayed the execution of the captured squad until sunset to give Sagiri time to return. One hour. After that, the delay would end, and events would begin moving without him. Kiuga tightened his grip on the rooftop ledge. He had spent the entire day pretending to be a man who should have been here. Yet the real Sagiri was still missing. The city was reaching a breaking point, the crowd below growing larger by the minute, and for the first time all day, Kiuga found himself staring toward the horizon, hoping to see a familiar figure walking back before the last light disappeared.

"Tell me he is here somehow." A voice interrupted from further back.

It was Zifara.

Kiuga's hands tightened on the edge of the platform. He had never felt so defeated before. He was going to watch his squad die and then die, and there was nothing he could do about it. But even angry he felt so weak that he could not do anything to save anyone. He had always thought he was smart enough to get out of every situation, but now he was beginning to think real battle was nothing he could easily predict.

Kiuga could not even answer. His back remained still as he watched the ground below.

"I can't hold the council back anymore. I have been trying to argue with them to do it out of the city to buy time, but I have been overruled.

"Guess then it is time to die. It is never too late to die." Sagiri said in an icy tone. He had never felt whatever feeling was inside of him as he watched the new development.

Kiuga's gaze settled on the execution grounds below. Workers and soldiers had spent the entire afternoon preparing it, and now, as the sun slowly descended toward the canyon walls, the final touches were being made. The large square at the center of the inner city had been cleared completely. Barricades surrounded it on every side while rows of armed warriors stood shoulder to shoulder to hold back the swelling crowds.

A raised platform dominated the center of the square, its dark wooden surface stained by the fading light of evening. Torches were already being lit around its edges despite the remaining daylight, their flames flickering in the growing shadows. More soldiers arrived every few minutes, taking positions along rooftops, walls, and intersections overlooking the square.

The city expected trouble. Everyone knew it. Kiuga watched his squad being brought into holding tents nearby while officials moved between groups of officers making final preparations. Beyond the barricades, the crowd stretched as far as he could see. Thousands upon thousands of people pressed against one another, their voices rising into a restless roar that drifted across the rooftops.

The setting sun painted the square in shades of red and gold, giving the entire scene the appearance of a battlefield waiting for the first strike. Kiuga leaned against the edge of the roof and checked the horizon again. The sun was sinking quickly now. Every passing minute made the platform below feel more real. More permanent. And still there was no sign of Sagiri.

"I am ready to die with my men. Take me down." I heard all he said after a long while before he turned around, face hard and expression cold. "Thank you for buying as always."

Chapter 337: TIME TO DIE

Kiuga stepped down from the rooftop and joined the procession moving toward the city square. The escort had already been prepared, and they wore red ceremonial ropes over their combat and armor. The colour of blood.

Zifara was walking with his head high, even with the weight of the gamble he was holding crushing down on him. He had to give the people what they wanted.

Kiuga stepped out of the gate after him, and the procession followed. Behind him were Kaka and Banga, and he could feel Kaka's hostility rise. He just hoped the boy would not fight everyone on their way to death.

Dressed in Sagiri's cloak, he kept his head high and his pace steady despite the hostility surrounding him. The reaction was immediate. People spotted the dark figure, and the chants grew louder. Angry voices erupted from every direction. Accusations, curses, and demands for blood followed him through the streets.

Soldiers struggled to keep the crowds behind the barricades as people pushed forward, some pointing directly at him while others shouted for his death. The noise rolled through the city like thunder, yet Kiuga never broke stride. Ahead of him walked the General of the South, his presence alone enough to keep the warriors disciplined.

Rows of elite soldiers cleared a path through the packed streets while the General led the procession toward the execution square. The closer they drew, the denser the crowds became. Every rooftop, balcony, and window overlooking the route was occupied. Thousands of eyes followed them. Thousands of voices demanded punishment. Kiuga could feel the weight of their hatred pressing against him from all sides, but he continued forward beneath the cloak, saying nothing as the execution platform came into view at the heart of the square.

The General walked ahead without slowing. He is the man entrusted with carrying out the sentence if dusk arrived and Sagiri failed to return. They were men pushed to the wall, and their situation could only change if Sagiri suddenly showed up.

Kiuga watched from the platform as the prisoners were finally brought out. The noise from the crowd swelled instantly. The first five were led forward in chains, their hands bound behind their backs, and thick white execution ropes draped across their shoulders and around their waists, marking them as condemned.

Soldiers escorted them onto the platform before forcing them into position near its center. Their faces were bruised and exhausted from their confinement, yet thousands of eyes remained fixed upon them with little sympathy. Then came the remaining three. Banga. Kaka. And Kiuga's own companions in this disaster.

Unlike the others, they were not led into place. They were thrown down onto their knees. Warriors immediately stepped forward and forced their shoulders downward, keeping them there with firm

hands. The wooden platform groaned beneath the combined weight of prisoners, guards, and officials as the final preparations continued around them.

"Galaka!!" Kaka cursed, ready to fight, but Kiuga shot him a look and shook his head. He really knew the boy was at his limit. If he moved, he would only kill maybe a hundred in his rampage. That would force Kiuga to join, and then they would be outnumbered and slaughtered like animals with no full corpses. It would also give away the fact that they were from the north, and that could taint sagiri's image even further.

Torches burned brighter as the last light of day faded across the square. Beyond the barricades, the crowd stretched in every direction, a sea of faces illuminated by firelight and anger. Chants echoed from the surrounding streets and rooftops, rising and falling like waves. At the front of the platform stood the General, silent and unmoving as he looked out over the city.

Dusk was almost here.

The hour to die was growing closer and painfully closer

The General stepped forward as the noise of the crowd gradually died down. His gaze swept across the thousands gathered in the square before settling upon the prisoners kneeling behind him.

"The South stands upon the edge of uncertainty," he said, his voice carrying effortlessly across the square. "Laws exist so that no man, chief or warrior, may place himself above them. Today judgment is passed not out of hatred, but duty." The words were met with scattered cheers from the crowd. The General remained silent for a moment before turning toward the kneeling figure draped in Sagiri's cloak.

"Do you have any final words, Sagiri?" The entire square seemed to hold its breath. Kiuga slowly raised his head. Through the disguise, he could feel thousands of eyes fixed upon him. For a long moment, he said nothing. Then he looked out across the sea of angry faces and spoke.

"The South does not deserve Sagiri." Silence followed. Absolute silence. Even the crowd seemed caught off guard by the answer. Kiuga's gaze remained steady as he looked over the people demanding blood. "Killing one of your own because of selfish means. Just kill me already. " Kiuga's voice sounded even colder to his ears. He knew Zifara's hands were tied like his, but it was the people he hated more.

"The South does not deserve Sagiri." His words were cold. He had never felt so much hate for a people.

A sudden commotion erupted near the edge of the platform at that moment.

Soldiers turned in surprise as Azir broke through the line, stumbling forward as he ran. His face was wet with tears. He nearly fell twice before reaching the steps leading to the execution platform.

"Uncle!" he shouted, his voice cracking. "Uncle, please!"

The crowd fell silent as the young city lord pushed past several startled guards and threw himself toward the General.

"Please don't kill Big Brother!" Azir cried. "Please don't do it! I will be good! I promise I will be good!" He grabbed at the General's arm with both hands, openly sobbing in front of thousands of people.

"I won't sneak out anymore! I won't cause trouble! Please don't kill him!" His desperate voice echoed across the square. Then he turned toward the kneeling figure in the dark cloak.

"Big Brother!" Azir shouted. "Fight back! Please fight back!" He took a step forward. "You're stronger than all of them! Just fight back!" Kiuga felt his chest tighten. He kept his head lowered. He did not look at the boy. He could not. He turned his face slightly away instead.

The boy was so stupid and naive to the end. Acting so unchiefly. Kiuga thought. But at least he loved Sagiri for real.

Sagiri... you might have one person in the south worth not killing

A sad smile took over Kiuga's face.

Chapter 338. NICK OF TIME

Azir knew Sagiri too well. One look into his eyes and the disguise could unravel. Kiuga wanted to comfort the boy, but he stayed looking down. Somehow, he felt emotional about that.

"Big Brother!" Azir cried again, his voice breaking completely. "Please say something!" But Kiuga remained silent. He stared at the wooden platform beneath him and said nothing while the boy's sobs echoed across the execution square.

"Azir! Behave like a city lord!" Zifara yelled an instruction, but of course, Azir kept weeping and begging. Oh, his knees with no shred of dignity."

"Take the city lord away!!" Zifara said his voice was hardening, and his left eye twitched. The child was going to be the death of him.

"Now then, as the people will it, for masquerading to be a chief and of a respectable departed clan, and joining our ranks. You shall all therefore die." Zifara said after a pause.

The square fell silent as the General raised a hand. One by one, the eight prisoners were forced forward. The five condemned men were pushed onto the execution blocks first, their bound hands preventing any resistance as soldiers pressed their necks against the stained wood.

Beside them, Banga, Kaka, and the cloaked figure posing as Sagiri were driven to their knees and held firmly in place as well on chopping boards. Behind each prisoner stood an executioner clad in dark armor, both hands resting upon the hilt of a heavy blade. Torches flickered in the gathering dusk, casting long shadows across the platform.

Azir stood frozen near the front, tears streaming down his face as he watched. Around him, thousands of people held their breath. The chants had finally died. Even the crowd seemed unwilling to break the terrible stillness that had settled over the square. Then the first drum sounded.

A single deep boom rolled through the city like thunder.

Azir flinched.

Another followed. Eight drum beats would sound, and after each one for each man sounded, they would all die. Each beat drew the executioners' blades higher. Azir's hands trembled. Eight drum beats for each of the men about to lose their heads.

His eyes never left the cloaked figure.

"Big Brother..." he whispered, his voice barely audible. The sixth beat of the drum landed on the furcoated giant drum, its deep note swelling across the square as every executioner tightened their grip and prepared to strike.

"Noo!!" Azir screamed. He could not watch Sagiri die. He had saved his life.

"Please, no uncle!!" Azir begged his knees, almost giving out, while he was held back by two of his men. He could not even recognize the voice coming from deep inside him. He was about to watch a man he had shown his inner chambers die. A man who had saved his life. He felt as if he was dying at that moment.

Why was Big Brother acting so weak anyway?

"Big brother, you are being a coward!! You can't just die without putting up a fight." Azir cried.

The final drum had not yet fallen when Azir suddenly moved. Only one beat remained now—the eighth beat.

One moment, he was struggling against the soldiers holding him back. Next, he twisted free just enough to snatch a dagger from a warrior's belt. Gasps erupted across the square. Before anyone could react, Azir pressed the blade against his own throat.

Everything stopped instantly. The executioners froze. The soldiers froze. The crowd froze. Even Zifara's eyes widened in shock. Azir stood trembling, tears streaking down his face, the dagger shaking in his hand but remaining firmly against his skin.

"If Big Brother dies," he cried, his voice breaking as it echoed across the square, "I die too!" The words struck the crowd like a physical blow. Thousands of people stared in stunned silence. The General's expression hardened. The Warriors took cautious steps forward.

"Azir," someone called. "Put the knife down."

He shook his head violently.

"No!" His grip tightened.

"You all want him dead! Then kill me too!" The square remained locked in silence, every eye fixed on the young city lord. For the briefest moment, even the execution seemed forgotten. Then the stillness began to crack as soldiers shifted uneasily and voices started rising once more from the crowd.

For a brief moment, the entire square hung between chaos and silence.

Then the General's expression hardened. His hand rose slowly into the air, signaling the final count. At the same instant, his other hand moved. A short blade flashed from his fingers and cut through the air with deadly precision.

Azir barely had time to react before the weapon struck the dagger in his hand, knocking it away in a shower of sparks. The knife spun across the platform and clattered against the stone below. Soldiers immediately surged forward to seize the boy.

Azir screamed and struggled against them, reaching toward the prisoners as tears streamed down his face. Zifara, the Kai of the south, never looked away from the execution platform. He was really commendable in strength. Even when pinned down by the odds, he made the whole thing look easy, and he did not lose his composure once. His raised hand remained steady.

Around him, eight executioners tightened their grip on their weapons. The crowd held its breath. The sun slipped beneath the canyon walls. And then the final beat of the drum sounded. A single thunderous boom rolled across Thazir, echoing from rooftop to rooftop as the General's hand began to fall.

The executioners moved as one.

Eight blades rose into the air, catching the last traces of firelight as they reached the peak of their arc. Azir's struggles became frantic. Soldiers could barely hold him as he screamed himself hoarse, tears streaming down his face while he reached desperately toward the platform.

The council members were all standing in the high place with the supreme chief, and of course, they managed to keep their expressions neutral. Perhaps they had not expected Sagiri to go down so easily, or perhaps they were thinking they had overreacted. Even so, no one could change the decisions now. Those who could not agree and those who agreed to his death. All their hands were tied now.

The crowd stood frozen, thousands of faces locked upon the descending blades, many eager, many fearful, and some suddenly uncertain now that the moment had finally arrived. Banga clenched his jaw. Kaka lowered his head and exhaled slowly. The five condemned men stared ahead in grim silence. Kiuga remained perfectly still beneath Sagiri's cloak, his gaze fixed on the horizon rather than the executioners behind him.

Around the square, warriors tightened their grips on their weapons. The city itself seemed to stop breathing.

Then something shook. A deep vibration rolled through the stone beneath their feet. The platform rattled. Torches flickered violently. The crowd stumbled in confusion. A second tremor followed, far stronger than the first. The ground lurched hard enough to throw people off balance. Cries erupted across the square. Buildings trembled. Dust fell from rooftops. Even the executioners swayed, their carefully raised blades wavered as they fought to keep their footing. The tremors continued, growing stronger with each passing heartbeat, until it felt as though something immense was moving beneath the city itself.

Then a cry loud enough to shake the foundation of Thazir tore through the air and the inner city. It was enough to have everyone tremble in fear.

Everyone in the inner city searched for the source frantically, but it seemed to have come from everywhere at the same time.

Chapter 339: NO MERCY

Then came another roar. It exploded across the city without warning, a sound so vast and unnatural that it seemed to tear through the air itself.

It did not sound like the roar of a beast. It was a wail. Ancient, furious, and agonized. Every person in the square froze as the sound washed over them. Some dropped to their knees. Others covered their ears.

The tremors intensified.

The Chief's Fortress, a little distance away from the square, seemed to shift. For a terrifying moment, it looked as though the enormous structure was rising higher, growing taller against the darkening sky. Shadows crawled across its walls.

Then two colossal red eyes opened above it. The eyes hung over the fortress like twin burning moons, their crimson glow spilling across the city below.

Silence lasted only a heartbeat before another roar followed. Louder and Closer this time. The sound slammed into the square with enough force to make the platform shudder beneath the prisoners. The Warriors stumbled, and horses reared. Even the General's cloak snapped violently in the shockwave. A chill spread through the crowd as thousands of people found themselves staring at those impossible red eyes.

And for the first time that day, the cries for execution vanished completely.

The red eyes of the beast moved again, taking in the whole crowd before they landed on the square below. At first, nobody understood what they were seeing. The eyes seemed too large, too distant, too impossible to belong to a living creature. Then the darkness surrounding the Chief's Fortress shifted. The stone cracked loudly, and entire sections of the fortress disappeared behind a massive shape unfolding itself from the rooftops. Gasps spread through the city.

The creature rose higher and higher until its full size became apparent. It dwarfed buildings. Dwarfed towers. The serpent-like body coiled across rooftops and walls, black scales glistening beneath torchlight like polished obsidian.

Then it moved.

Not with the sluggishness expected of something so enormous, but with terrifying speed. The creature launched itself from the fortress roof. The air exploded beneath its weight. Buildings shook as its colossal form swept through the city. People scattered in panic. Some were knocked from their feet by the force of its passage alone. It flowed through the streets like a living river of darkness, weaving between buildings with impossible grace despite its monstrous size.

Rooftops shattered beneath the sweep of its tail. Walls cracked as its body brushed past them. Yet it never struck a person directly. Somehow, impossibly, it threaded its way through the chaos with precise, controlled violence, like a black blur.

A nightmare moving through the city.

Then it reached the square. The crowd broke apart as the beast surged into the open space. Its enormous body coiled around the execution grounds in a single fluid motion, scattering warriors and sending barricades flying. Dust erupted into the air. Torches toppled. The execution platform trembled.

Then the creature rose. Higher. Higher. Its head climbed above the square until it towered over everyone present. The red eyes burned like twin suns as they looked down upon the crowd. Steam escaped between rows of fangs larger than swords. Every scale seemed forged from darkness itself. The city that had been demanding blood moments before now stood frozen beneath the gaze of something ancient and terrible. And above the execution platform, the beast lowered its head and stared directly at the executioners.

The beast opened its jaws and roared. The sound detonated across the square like a physical force. A violent shockwave erupted outward, sweeping through the execution grounds. Executioners were thrown from their feet. Soldiers crashed into one another. The platform groaned and cracked beneath the pressure. Even Banga, Kaka, Kiuga, and the rest of the squad were hurled across the wood as the blast tore through the square.

Thousands of people stumbled or fell outright. Torches were extinguished. Banners snapped free from their poles. The roar rolled through the city and echoed from the canyon walls long after the beast had fallen silent, accompanied by people's screams of fear.

Then, through the chaos, a single voice spoke. It was calm, unhurried, and annoyingly ordinary compared to everything that had just happened.

"Zaira, calm down." The words carried effortlessly across the square. The colossal serpent froze and relaxed a bit, but its hostility did not dwindle in the slightest.

"Show some respect." A figure stepped forward from atop the beast's head, black cloak stirring in the wind. "I am already late for my execution."

For a heartbeat, nobody moved. Then thousands of eyes widened in disbelief as they finally recognized the man standing upon the creature's head.

Sagiri.

As the dust slowly settled, the city finally got a clear look at the figure standing atop the beast's head.

Sagiri had changed.

The difference was impossible to miss. His cloak was still there, but it hung differently now, snapping behind him in the wind like a banner. The markings that had once appeared only in moments of battle now covered much of the visible skin around his neck and hands, flowing beneath his clothes like living black veins.

The most unsettling of all were his eyes. Both were crimson. Not merely red, but a deep luminous scarlet that seemed to glow against the gathering darkness. Perhaps they had missed him all along because he was still dwarfed in size to the beast he stood upon.

There was no trace of the old mismatch from before. No hint of the eye everyone remembered. Only those twin crimson eyes are calmly surveying the square below. His face had become sharper somehow, carrying a stillness that felt older than before. The exhaustion and uncertainty that had often lingered around him were gone.

In their place stood something colder. Even the way he held himself had changed. Sagiri stood upon the beast's head without effort, balanced as though the colossal serpent beneath him were solid ground. The wind tugged at his cloak while Zaira's enormous body shifted beneath him, yet he never moved an inch. From the platform below to the rooftops surrounding the square, people found themselves staring.

For a moment, the entire square remained frozen.

Then Azir's eyes widened.

"BIG BROTHER!" he screamed.

The cry echoed across the square as he broke free from the soldiers and ran forward, openly crying and laughing at the same time.

"Big Brother! Big Brother!" Sagiri looked down from Zaira's head, one crimson eye twitching slightly.

"Azir." His voice carried effortlessly across the square. "What did I tell you about acting without dignity?" Azir immediately lowered his head.

"I am just happy... Sorry..." Behind him, Kiuga finally let out a long breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He pushed himself to his feet, brushed dust from his clothes, and looked up at Sagiri.

"Your entries become more dramatic every time." His voice was dry. "One day you're going to arrive riding the moon." A few nervous laughs escaped from Banga and the rest of the squad, especially Ulekai the fearful. Kaka just looked irritated but relieved.

"You were planning to die so easily and taint my name. I could not let that happen now, could I?" Sagiri said with a warm voice before it turned to ice on the last part.

The General said nothing at first. He simply stared at the man standing atop the giant serpent for a long moment. Then, for the first time that day, the tension left his shoulders. It was subtle, but it was visible in how his right eye twitched.

"What took you so long, Chief of N'folu?" Zifara asked, looking like a weight had been lifted off his shoulder.

"Well, General, it is never too late to die," Sagiri said. He already understood what was happening.

The faint warmth that had appeared on Sagiri's face vanished. Slowly, his head turned toward the high platform where the council sat overlooking the square. The moment his gaze settled upon them, the atmosphere changed.

A crushing killing intent erupted from him without warning, spilling across the city like an invisible tide. Warriors stiffened. Horses panicked. Several members of the crowd dropped to their knees as an instinctive terror seized them. Even Zaira lowered its massive head, crimson eyes fixed upon the platform. The air itself seemed heavier and colder as Sagiri's scarlet eyes never left the council.

"I come back to the south after sixteen years no one welcomes me. I stay in the desert eating crabs. I came south to pay my last rites to my clan, and you dare challenge me. While I'm gone, you prepare an execution platform for my companions. You even chant for me to go north, where I came from. The same northern tribes that wiped out my clan. It seems you have no limit to how far you are willing to go." His gaze swept across the assembled chiefs and elders.

"Very well." The markings along his skin stirred. "Since the South has chosen war with me..." The ground beneath Zaira cracked. "...then I will show no mercy." The last words echoed across the square, and for the first time that day, fear truly appeared on the faces of the council.

Chapter 340. FORGOTTEN DANCE

"Very well." The markings along his skin stirred. He pushed the hood of his cloak back and looked at the raised platform for a long moment before continuing.

"Since the South has chosen war with me..." The ground beneath Zaira cracked. "...then I will show no mercy." The last words echoed across the square, and for the first time that day, fear truly appeared on the faces of the council.

At those words, Sagiri slowly opened his hand. Darkness gathered above his palm. The space around his palm seemed to fold inward before Nokai emerged with a metallic whisper that carried across the silent square.

The black blade settled into his grasp as always. Only this time, the blade's aura had changed. It was not only deadly, but it also carried an ancient touch to it. The moment his fingers closed around the hilt, another change swept over him. The markings crawling across his skin brightened and spread, flowing from his neck along his jaw and across the backs of his hands like living rivers of ink.

He seemed to glow atop the beast so hard that everyone gathered could see him clear as day, and they held their breath.

None of them had seen such an occurrence. Perhaps many had heard about the N'folu, but none had ever seen one before. They had never even seen a person with such a beast. It is a creature of myth, and apart from its parents, who were kept by koru and died in prison, many had never seen such a beast.

His crimson eyes seemed to burn brighter. Even the air around him distorted faintly, rippling with the pressure pouring from his body. In his place stood something sharper. More dangerous. The wind gathered around him, snapping his cloak violently behind his back while Nokai's dark edge reflected the torchlight in crimson flashes. Below, warriors unconsciously tightened their grip on their weapons. None of the council members was sitting now.

Nobody doubted it now. If Sagiri chose violence, the city would bleed before the night was over.

Sagiri raised Nokai and pointed it toward the council platform. His crimson eyes swept across the assembled chiefs before he spoke. "Before I kill you I will remind you." His voice echoed across the square. "I will show you the Desert Dance of my forefathers, since the South has forgotten. I am never late to die, and I will not let you die before you see with your own eyes why your meaningless lives have to come to an end.

Before anyone could react, he stepped forward and vanished from Zaira's head. The stone beneath the beast exploded as Sagiri launched himself into the air. At the same moment, Zaira moved.

The colossal serpent surged upward after him with a roar that shook the city. Higher and higher they climbed above the execution grounds. Sagiri remained suspended in the darkening sky, cloak whipping wildly around him, while Zaira circled him in enormous spirals. The beast moved faster with each

revolution, its colossal body carving through the clouds like a living storm. Black scales flashed between streaks of crimson light from its eyes.

Wind began to gather around them. Dust rose from the streets below. Banners snapped violently. The entire city watched as man and beast climbed into the sky together, one standing motionless at the center while the other coiled around him like a dragon guarding an ancient king.

"Big brother is so awesome!" Azir marvelled. He was probably the only person who was not scared of dying, apart from Sagiri's squad.

Then the desert answered immediately. At first, it was only a distant rumble beyond the canyon walls. A sound so deep that many mistook it for thunder. Then the horizon shifted. Vast streams of sand rose into the air from the endless desert surrounding Thazir city, lifting as though drawn by an invisible hand.

The city watched in stunned silence as golden rivers spiraled toward the sky from every direction. They crossed the canyon walls, swept over fortifications, and poured into the skies above the city. The wind became a roar.

Dust filled the air.

Zaira continued its violent dance around Sagiri while the gathering sand joined the motion, weaving itself between the serpent's coils in enormous spirals. One became ten. Ten became hundreds. Soon, a colossal vortex stretched above Thazir, connecting the city and desert in a single swirling pillar. Sagiri stood at its center, cloak snapping behind him, Nokai held loosely at his side as though commanding the storm required no effort at all.

The sands moved with purpose. Ancient patterns formed and vanished within the vortex. Chiefs saw forgotten symbols from old histories. Elders saw memories of battles long buried by time. Higher and higher the storm climbed until it blotted out the stars themselves. The desert had not merely answered to him, but it had joined the dance. Sagiri remained suspended in the air with hands wide open.

Suddenly and finally, he moved.

With more than the rigid precision of a swordsman or the practiced forms of a warrior. With the fluid grace of a dancer answering an ancient rhythm. One step carried him through the air. Then another. His body curved and sprang in graceful yet beautiful movements.

Nokai followed the motion as though it were an extension of his body. The blade cut through the swirling sands, leaving black trails that lingered long after the strike had passed.

The dance began slowly. Almost gently. Every movement seemed effortless, every turn flowing naturally into the next. Then the tempo changed. Sagiri spun like a whirlwind in the air so fast he was a blur. Nokai split in his hand and rose into the air. One blade became two. With more twirling, two became four. Four became eight. The blades joined the storm, moving within the desert's currents as though they had become part of the dance itself.

Sagiri never stopped once the dance began. He stepped through empty air, turned in movements only he understood, and swept Nokai in a wide arc, his hands wide as if he was holding everything in place while still dancing perfectly.

His eyes were closed as he sank deeper and deeper into the ancient dance.

More blades appeared in dozens, then hundreds. The storm responded. The desert roared louder. Zaira's enormous form coiled through the vortex while black blades flashed between the serpent's movements like fragments of a shattered night sky.

Faster.

The dance grew faster.

Every motion carried intent and deep emotion that all who watched were suddenly gripped with sadness and sorrow. Every turn released another wave of blades. Hundreds became thousands. Thousands became a glittering sea of black steel suspended within the sandstorm. The sky above Thazir disappeared beneath them. Yet despite the violence gathering around him, there was something beautiful about it.

The blades moved with purpose, not chaos. They followed the rhythm of the dance. The rhythm of the desert. Ancient, relentless, and powerful. Watching it felt like standing before a force of nature given human form. A storm that had learned to dance. And at its center, surrounded by countless blades and swirling sands, Sagiri moved with the calm certainty of a man performing a dance deep from his heart.

The dance went on and on and on and then...

It can come to an abrupt end.