

KEEPER 341

Chapter 341. FIRST TO DIE

Then the dance ended.

Sagiri's final step carried him to stillness, and for the first time since he had risen into the sky, he stopped moving.

The desert answered immediately. The roaring winds weakened and subsided. The towering vortex unraveled. Rivers of sand drifted gently back toward the earth, spilling across rooftops, streets, and walls before settling into silence.

Zaira's massive coils slowed and came to rest behind him like a mountain of living darkness. Yet the blades did not fall. Thousands upon thousands of black blades remained suspended in the sky. They hung motionless above the inner city, above the fortress, above the execution square.

More stretched beyond the walls into the outer city until it seemed as though a storm of steel had frozen in place over all of Thazir. Every person who looked up found a blade pointed somewhere in their direction. The sight stole the breath from the city.

Warriors stood rigid, afraid to move. What could they possibly do against a shower of blades?

The council platform had gone pale. The executioners no longer held their weapons. Azir stared upward with wide eyes, unable to decide whether he was terrified or amazed.

Even those in the distant outer districts had witnessed the dance. They stood upon rooftops, walls, and streets staring toward the skies where the countless blades blotted out portions of the evening sky.

The chants were gone. The anger was gone. What remained was something far older than either. Fear. Not the fear of death. The fear of realizing that the man you had condemned possessed the power to carry out the sentence instead. The fear of knowing that they had been mistaken. And in the silence that followed, with the desert finally still and the sea of blades hanging over the city like unmoving rain, every person in Thazir understood the same thing.

They were surely going to die.

The silence stretched across the city.

Then Sagiri looked down. The moment his crimson eyes settled upon the square below, the killing intent returned. This time it was worse. Deeper. It did not explode outward like before. It descended. Heavy and relentless, like the weight of a mountain settling over the city. The Warriors found it difficult to breathe.

Several members of the crowd lowered their heads instinctively. Even the council platform grew noticeably quieter. Above them, the thousands of suspended blades remained perfectly still. Sagiri began to descend slowly and deliberately.

His cloak drifted behind him while Zaira watched from above, its massive red eyes fixed upon the city. The distance between him and the execution platform gradually closed. Fifty feet to forty to thirty. Then he stopped.

Hanging motionless in the air, the square. His gaze swept across the council, the executioners, the warriors, and finally the platform where his companions had nearly been put to death. The city held its breath. Not a single person spoke, but their fear was loud. It rivaled Sagiri's killing intent. Sagiri remained suspended there, crimson eyes glowing against the darkness, while the storm of steel hung above Thazir, waiting for a command that had not yet come.

"Now then, why don't we all die together?" He announced.

Then his gaze settled upon the council platform.

"But first... Who ordered my death?" His voice was not loud, but every person in the city heard it.

No one answered, and the silence only deepened.

Sagiri's eyes narrowed slightly.

"I asked a question." A blade shifted somewhere above the city.

Just one.

The metallic sound echoed like a thunderclap through the stillness. Several council members visibly flinched.

"Who ordered my death?" Sagiri repeated. "Who decided that while I was risking my life for this city, my companions should be dragged onto an execution platform?"

His gaze swept across the platform. The killing intent pressing upon the city grew heavier.

The tip of the blade pointed toward the council platform.

"Answer."

No one answered. Sagiri's expression did not change, however. One of the countless blades hanging above the city suddenly disappeared in the next moment. A sharp whistle split the air. The Mazuku Chief's body jerked violently in his seat before a black blade burst from his chest. He was the one who had been sitting on the N'folu seat for years.

Blood spilled from his mouth as he stared down in disbelief. Then he toppled from his chair and crashed onto the stone below.

Dead.

Gasps erupted throughout the square before an eerie silence swallowed the city once more. Sagiri lowered his hand slowly, his crimson eyes fixed upon the fallen chief.

"That is for sitting on a chair that isn't yours for a year longer than you should have..." he said calmly.

His gaze swept across the frozen council.

"... and for sending killers after the City Lord." The blade dissolved into darkness moments later. No one dared move. Above them, thousands of blades remained suspended in the sky, waiting.

"Now," Sagiri said, his voice carrying across the silent city, "who else would like to pretend innocence?" He snarled

Silence

"My patience runs thin. Everyone has a minute before they die."

"Fifty-nine..." Sagiri counted, and the pressure rose. Everyone trembled.

"Please don't!" Azir's voice rang across the square. The young city lord had fallen to his knees, tears streaming freely down his face once more. He looked up at Sagiri, desperation written across every feature.

"Please, Big Brother! Don't kill them!" His voice cracked. "Please! I know they're bad! I know they did wrong! But please don't kill everyone! I am their city lord, and I am responsible for how badly they welcomed you. I am the one who led them by bad example and tried to kill you first."

The sight stunned the city almost as much as the execution itself. Then another figure stepped forward. Kai dropped to one knee beside Azir and lowered his head.

"Lord Sagiri," he said quietly, "I ask the same. Mercy." More gasps rippled through the square. Above them, Sagiri remained suspended in the air, surrounded by a sky full of blades. His crimson eyes settled first on Kai, then on Azir.

For a long moment, he said nothing. Then he finally spoke.

"I will not let people live merely because you ask, Azir." The words struck hard. Azir visibly flinched. Sagiri's gaze swept across the council platform. "The dead chief sent assassins after a child." His voice remained calm. The killing intent surrounding him remained suffocating.

"Mercy is not the absence of consequences." His eyes returned to Azir. "Nor is justice something that can be bought with tears. If so, where is my justice?" The thousands of blades above the city remained perfectly still as everyone waited to hear what he would say next.

"If you have to kill the people of Thazir, then kill me too!" Azir said in a stronger voice this time.

"Oh... then I will make you watch before I kill you," Sagiri said in a cold voice, and Azir gasped.

Chapter 342. NOT ENOUGH

Sagiri's expression did not change. His gaze remained fixed upon the council platform as though Azir's plea had never interrupted him.

"Fifty-eight." His voice echoed across the silent city. Nobody moved.

"Fifty-seven." The suspended blades hung motionless above Thazir.

"Fifty-six." The pressure in the square continued to build. With each number, more council members began to sweat. Warriors shifted uneasily. Even the crowd seemed afraid to breathe too loudly. Sagiri continued his count with the same calm tone.

"Fifty. Forty-nine. Forty-eight..." The numbers fell steadily, each one sounding more final than the last. By the time he reached forty, several council members had lost all color in their faces.

"Thirty-three. Thirty-two. Thirty-one..." Then someone broke.

Elder Maresha suddenly stumbled from his seat. The head of the Wandering Members of the Council crashed to his knees upon the stone platform. Gasps erupted from those around him. The elderly man

lowered his head so quickly that it nearly struck the floor. His shoulders shook visibly. Everyone in the square turned toward him. Above them, Sagiri's count stopped.

"Thirty." The number hung in the air. The city fell silent once more. Every eye settled upon the kneeling elder.

"I, elder Maresha, took a neutral stance as did most of the wondering members. We dared not assume, yet we have sinned nevertheless. A neutral vote can not win, but as wondering members we dare not bet on a side we do not understand..."

"So you are a coward?" Sagiri snickered.

"Indeed. I had heard the rumours of his return of our lost son of the south. They were too good to be true, but when it mattered, I chose to remain neutral. As traders and businessmen, we dare not take a hard stance. Our cowardice has indeed cost us this time.

So then, the wondering members of the council remained neutral? So the Iron matron, prince of tides, veiled speaker, Archivist, Beast warden, and Hawkeyed judge took a neutral stance?

It was a wise decision, but they irritated Sagiri even more.

"If I dare ask the veiled speaker, you had your masters of whispers bring me south. Why could you remain neutral in this matter?" Sagiri asked, looking at the man shrouded in dark clothes from head to toe, leaving not a nail or a single air exposed.

It is said that the veiled speaker never speaks easily, and Sagiri was quite interested in seeing if the man could answer him. A moment of silence went by before a voice filled it. It was low yet a little gruff. It seemed like a set of bells that could put anyone to sleep.

"You are already indebted to me. Couldn't saving you twice become too far for you to pay." The veiled speaker spoke.

"Oh..."

"Besides, if you are so easily killed, then won't I have already wasted money and resources. I would have also stood in the way of southerners from seeing what a true N'folu keeper is capable of..." The veiled speaker continued.

He then fell to his knees.

"I hereby acknowledge you as the last N'folu. chief and keeper. I will serve you earnestly from today on.

The archivist was next to fall to his knees.

"I have been bored for years without interesting knowledge to write about. Even the hidden texts do not have what I have witnessed today. I am a coward, but I am happy I got to see you dance the ancient dance of the south. I will die a happy man if you wish for it. I acknowledge you as the last N'folu, chief, and keeper."

"I, the Iron matron, don't kneel to a man but..." A woman said before she fell to her knees. "You have interested me. I am no coward. I merely don't bet on losing sides. I now recognize you as the last N'folu, chief and Keeper." She said with pride.

She reminded Sagiri so much of Seya. Sagiri wondered how their exchange went.

"I accept you as the last N'folu, chief and keeper." The beast warder said, falling to his knee.

"As the hawk-eye judge. I must say my eye missed seeing the truth that was right in front of me this time." The hawk-eyed judge took his pledge, followed by the Prince of Tides.

The proud men and women who had spent the day judging others now knelt before the execution square. Elder Maresha lowered his head completely.

The rest of the council followed. The chiefs and even the supreme chief. Sagiri could sense hostility from the woman, hatred, and something else, yet she lowered herself finally.

"We acknowledge Lord Sagiri." Her voice carried across the silence. "The last N'folu." Another elder spoke. "Chief and Keeper." Then another joined. And another. Soon, the words spread across the entire council. "The last N'folu." "Chief and Keeper." "The Keeper of the South."

The acknowledgements rolled through the platform until every member was speaking them. Thousands in the square watched in stunned silence as the rulers of the South bowed their heads before the man suspended in the air. Above them, Sagiri remained motionless. Endless blades hanging in the sky behind him.

The sight of the council kneeling broke something within the city. One by one, warriors lowered themselves to a knee. Then the soldiers along the barricades followed. The movement spread through the square like a ripple through water. Thousands of people began sinking to their knees. Some did so out of fear. Others out of desperation. Others because they could think of nothing else to do beneath the sea of blades hanging over their heads.

Within moments, the execution square had become a field of bowed heads. The motion continued beyond the inner city, spreading through the outer districts as word and sight carried across rooftops and streets. An old woman knelt. A merchant followed. Entire families dropped where they stood. Then the chanting began. Quietly at first.

"We accept you as the Last N'folu..." A second voice joined. Then a hundred. Then a thousand. Soon, the entire city seemed to be speaking as one.

"We accept you as the Last N'folu, Chief and Keeper. Please spare our lives." The words rolled through Thazir like thunder. Again and again they chanted them, heads lowered toward the man suspended in the darkening sky. Zaira watched with burning crimson eyes. And at the center of it all, Sagiri stood in silence while an entire city knelt beneath him and begged for mercy.

"Not enough." Sagiri's voice suddenly cut through the chanting like a blade.

Instantly, the city fell silent. Thousands of people froze where they knelt. Even the council looked up in alarm. Then, as if terrified that silence itself would anger him, the chants resumed with even greater desperation.

"We accept you as the Last N'folu, Chief and Keeper! Please spare our lives!" The words echoed from every corner of Thazir.

Elder Maresha finally raised his head from where he knelt.

"Lord Sagiri..." His voice trembled. "The South has wronged you indeed. What compensation do you seek?" The city quieted once more. Sagiri's crimson eyes slowly moved toward the distant fortress of the Supreme Chief.

"I require compensation." His voice was calm. Matter-of-fact. "The South failed me. Its leaders failed me."

The killing intent hanging over the city deepened slightly at those words.

"The Supreme Chief failed me and failed to keep his council in order." A chill swept through the council platform. Sagiri looked toward the highest tower in the city. "She has proven herself weak." His gaze returned to the kneeling rulers below.

"Therefore, I will take her position." The words landed like thunder. Gasps erupted across the square. Several council members visibly paled. Others simply stared in disbelief. Above them all, Sagiri remained suspended in the sky while a storm of blades hung over the city, making it painfully clear that this was not a request.

"If anyone believes I am wrong..." Sagiri said, his voice carrying effortlessly across the kneeling city, "...then stand."

No one dared move.

"Aren't you getting greedy?" Kiuga sighed under his breath. He was also on his knees. He couldn't remember the last time he had knelt so much.

"This boy has gone mad," Kaka said, but there was pride in his voice. The silence lingered. Sagiri tilted his head slightly to the side.

"I possess the relics of all five tribes of the South." His crimson eyes swept across the council platform. "I am certain the Supreme Chief neglected to tell you that."

Murmurs spread through the crowd.

"Five tribes...?"

Several elders exchanged startled looks. Sagiri continued before anyone could speak.

"The Archivist should know the ancient and founding law." His gaze settled upon the elderly keeper of records. "Only the rightful ruler can wield all five relics." The words struck the council harder than the threat of the blades. The Archivist remained frozen for several moments, his face pale beneath the weight of thousands of eyes. Then, slowly, he rose from his knees. The older man adjusted his robes and looked across the council before lowering his head toward Sagiri.

"That..." he said quietly. "It's true."

Chapter 343. THE NEW SUPREME CHIEF

For the first time since the city had knelt, the Supreme Chief moved. Still on her knees, she slowly raised her head and looked toward the figure suspended above the square. There was anger in her eyes now, pushing against the fear.

"You... you cannot simply declare yourself Supreme Chief," she said. Her voice was steady despite the thousands of blades hanging above the city.

A murmur swept through the crowd.

"The South has laws... Traditions... Councils." Sagiri looked down at her without expression.

"And yet those same laws allowed a chief to sit beyond his term. Allowed assassins to hunt the City Lord. Allowed my companions to be dragged to an execution platform while I was absent." The Supreme Chief's jaw tightened.

"That does not make you a ruler."

"No?" Sagiri tilted his head. "The relics disagree." A faint ripple moved through the council.

"Power does not grant legitimacy." The Supreme Chief pointed toward him. She was indeed something, and the more Sagiri talked to her, the more he got an odd feeling. Something was off about the woman that he could not quite put a finger on

"Then legitimacy should have stopped me." His answer was immediate. "It did not." The woman's face darkened. Around her, not a single council member rose to support her. Not one. Everyone remained kneeling. Watching. Waiting. Sagiri slowly lowered Nokai to his side.

"You speak of laws, yet you concealed the truth of the relics from your own council." His crimson eyes narrowed.

"The South is not ruled by strength alone. It is ruled by law. Tradition. Consensus." Her gaze locked onto Sagiri. "You threaten an entire city with blades hanging over their heads and call it legitimacy?" Above the square, Sagiri remained motionless.

"Oh...?"

"The South chose me." She spat. It seemed like she was stupid and careless, and perhaps loved power too much. A faint smile touched Sagiri's lips. It carried no warmth.

"Did it?" The question caused her expression to flicker. "Because from where I stand, the South seems to have spent the day trying to execute the man who saved its City Lord while the woman responsible hid behind a council unable even to call me to prove my innocence. If I knew better, I could say you are the one who wanted me dead the most." The crowd shifted uneasily. The Supreme Chief's face darkened. "Be careful, Sagiri." The warning echoed across the square.

"Or what?" Sagiri asked. The words were soft. Dangerous. His crimson eyes settled fully upon her.

She swallowed, and her hands curled into fists, but she did not say a thing.

"You failed to protect your people. Failed to control your council. Failed to stop assassins from targeting your own City Lord. Failed to prevent an unlawful execution." His voice never rose. "Tell me, Supreme Chief..." The title sounded almost insulting now. "...Which part of your rule would you like me to respect?" The square fell silent once more as every eye turned toward the woman standing alone before a city that was no longer certain whose side it was on.

Sagiri's gaze shifted from the Supreme Chief to the Archivist.

"Tell them," he said. "Tell them what the records say." The old man remained kneeling for a moment before lowering his head.

"It is true." His voice carried clearly across the square. "The relics are older than the councils. Older than the office of the Supreme Chief itself. The records state that the one acknowledged by all five relics possesses the strongest claim to rule the South. Besides, Lord Sagiri also commands the ancient beast. The last of its kind. The relics have chosen him. Yet we can't have two supreme chiefs. One has to step down. One has to respect what our ancestors say unless you wish to go against all this dear supreme Kun." A ripple of unease spread through the kneeling crowd.

The Supreme Chief's expression hardened, but she did not interrupt. The Archivist continued.

"In all surviving records, no ruler had ever wielded all five relics without the approval of the ancestors and the tribes. Only one last ruler could wield them after centuries. Even I thought it was a myth." Silence followed. Sagiri nodded once. Then he looked down upon the city.

"Good." He slowly raised a hand. Above Thazir, the countless blades shifted ever so slightly. The sound of steel moving through the air sent a visible shiver through the crowd. "Then let us make this simple." His crimson eyes swept across the kneeling council, the warriors, and the people below.

"Anyone who recognizes me as the Supreme Chief of the South gets to and live." He paused. "Anyone who does not..." His gaze drifted briefly toward the storm of blades suspended above the city. He did not finish the sentence. He didn't need to. The meaning settled over the square like a shadow.

"Choose."

The silence lasted only a heartbeat. Then Azir moved. The young City Lord dropped fully to the ground, pressing his forehead against the stone without hesitation. He was happy that Sagiri had given the people of Thazir a chance to choose and even happier that his big brother would get to be the supreme ruler.

"I recognize Lord Sagiri and my big brother as the Supreme Chief of the South," he declared without hesitation.

His voice echoed through the square. Behind him, Banga was the next to kneel. Then Kaka. Then the rest of Sagiri's squad followed one after another, lowering their heads without the slightest doubt. The Kai exhaled softly before placing a fist over his chest and bowing deeply. The warriors saw it. Their commander had made his choice. One by one, soldiers throughout the square began lowering their heads. The entire ranks followed.

Soon, thousands of warriors were kneeling and declaring their pledges.

Elder Maresha was next. The old man bowed until his forehead touched the platform.

"The Wandering Members recognize Lord Sagiri as Supreme Chief of the South." Every wandering elder behind him immediately followed suit. The sight broke the final resistance within the crowd.

People began dropping to their knees throughout the city. Entire streets lowered their heads as one.

The declaration spread like wildfire through the inner city and beyond the walls into the outer districts. Everywhere, people bowed. Everywhere, voices rose.

"We recognize Lord Sagiri as Supreme Chief of the South." The council held out the longest. Faces pale, pride battling survival. But one after another, they finally bowed. The Chiefs lowered their heads. Soon, the entire council platform knelt before him. Only one figure remained upright on her knees.

The Supreme Chief.

The city watched. The council watched. Even Sagiri waited. Not that he cared about her opinion anyway. If she refused, he would just kill her.

At last, her shoulders sagged. Slowly, reluctantly, she lowered her head. It was clearly not graceful. It was not willing. But she did it. And the moment her forehead touched the stone, there was no one left in the South still refusing to acknowledge Sagiri.

The chants continued for a long while, rolling through Thazir in endless waves until even the outer city had joined them. Sagiri listened in silence. Then, finally, he nodded once.

"Very well." The words were simple, yet relief swept through the city. Before anyone could react further, Sagiri spread his arms and stepped backward into empty air. He shot upward into the rain of blades. The movement was so sudden that gasps erupted from the crowd.

High above the city, the thousands of blades responded instantly. They rose with him. Rivers of black steel climbed into the skies from every corner of Thazir, forming vast spirals around his ascending figure.

This time, Zaira remained where she was, her colossal head lifted toward the sky as though watching a familiar performance. The blades continued gathering. Hundreds became thousands. Thousands became a storm. The storm became a vortex. Sagiri stood at its center, cloak whipping violently around him as Nokai drew the entire sea of steel inward.

It was art.

The blades twisted around one another in elegant patterns, weaving through the darkening sky like streams of black light before converging into a single point above him. The entire city watched in silence.

Then, with a final motion, every blade collapsed into one. A single enormous black blade hung in the heavens for the briefest moment before shrinking rapidly and flowing into Nokai's waiting form. The sky cleared, and the stars returned.

Without the rain of death hanging over them, everyone was now able to take a deep breath.

Sagiri slowly descended from above and landed effortlessly upon Zaira's head. His cloak settled behind him. Nokai rested casually at his side. For several heartbeats, nobody spoke. The city simply stared. Warriors, elders, chiefs, children, everyone of them looking upon the man standing atop the beast. Not in fear this time but in wonder.

For a few moments, neither Sagiri nor Zaira moved. The city remained kneeling beneath them, thousands of eyes fixed upon the pair. Then Zaira stirred suddenly.

The colossal beast slowly rose to its full height, scales grinding softly against stone as its immense body uncoiled from around the execution grounds. Buildings disappeared beneath its shadow. Its crimson eyes swept across the city one final time before turning toward the distant desert.

Sagiri remained standing upon its head, silent and unreadable. Without a word, Zaira began to move. Not with the violent speed it had displayed earlier, but with the calm confidence of a creature that knew nothing in the South could stop it. The beast flowed through the streets like a living river of darkness. Warriors instinctively moved aside. Crowds parted before it. No one dared stand in its path. It crossed the inner city, passed through the inner gates, and descended into the canyon beyond.

The desert welcomed its return, sands shifting beneath its passage while the wind carried away the echoes of the day. From the walls of Thazir, people watched until the colossal silhouette became smaller and smaller against the endless sea of gold. Eventually, only two crimson lights remained visible in the distance. Then those too vanished beyond the dunes, leaving behind a silent city filled with people still struggling to believe what it had witnessed.

Chapter 344: PAIN

The moment Thazir vanished beyond the horizon, the mask began to crack. Sagiri remained standing atop Zaira's head, but only barely. The crimson glow in his eyes flickered. His breathing grew uneven. Every movement of the beast sent fresh agony through his body.

The five relics were not meant to be awakened together and certainly not wielded by someone who carried the echo archive. They were greater in power than one person, and they had not learned to coexist.

The Archive had broadened too quickly. Too violent. Knowledge, power, memories, and authority had been forced into a vessel that should have spent months, perhaps years, adapting.

Half a year of meditation would have been the minimum. Half a year of isolation. Half a year of silence.

Instead, he had gone to war with the South days after his awakening. To save Azir. To save his squad. Now the price has come due. Every nerve in his body felt as though it were being torn apart.

The markings beneath his skin moved without his permission, crawling across his flesh like living things searching for a way out. The relics fought one another within him. Ancient powers pulling in different directions. The Archive expanded and expanded, threatening to shatter the boundaries of his mind. Memories that were not his own surfaced and vanished.

Names of dead kings. Forgotten wars. Lost languages. Entire lifetimes brushing against his consciousness. By the time Zaira reached the deep desert, blood was running from the corner of his mouth. Sagiri fell to his knees and wretched blood spilling it on Zaira's head. The beast needed to sleep, too. For months. It had grown overnight. The strain would catch up soon.

Sagiri barely made it into the cave. The moment his feet touched the stone floor, his legs gave out beneath him. He hit the ground hard and remained there for several breaths, trembling violently. The pain was no longer something he felt in parts of his body. It had become everything.

His muscles spasmed uncontrollably. Every heartbeat sent waves of agony through his veins as though molten metal had replaced his blood. His vision blurred and sharpened in rapid succession. One moment, the cave walls were clear. Next, they doubled and twisted. A ringing filled his ears. His stomach clenched so violently he nearly vomited. He tried to breathe, but even that hurt. Every breath scraped through his chest like broken glass.

A groan escaped him as he dragged himself forward. His fingers dug into the stone floor, nails scraping across rock. Then the pain surged again. Harder. Sagiri's back arched.

A strangled cry tore from his throat. His hands clawed so deeply into the stone that fragments cracked away beneath his fingers. Blood appeared beneath broken nails. He barely noticed. Sweat poured from him in sheets despite the coolness of the cave. His entire body shook. The markings beneath his skin writhed like living serpents, shifting beneath flesh and muscle as though trying to escape. Memories slammed into him without warning. Faces. Names. Cities. Wars. Thousands of years crashing through his mind. He couldn't tell where his thoughts ended, and the Archive began. Another spasm seized him.

His teeth clenched so hard he tasted blood. He wretched another mouthful of blood. The world narrowed into pain and instinct. Crawl. Breathe. Endure. Crawl again. Behind him, framed by the entrance, Zaira watched in silence. The colossal beast remained perfectly still, crimson eyes fixed upon its master. It did not move to help. It could not help its master this time.

This was a battle no creature could fight for him. Deep within the cave, Sagiri collapsed once more, fingers carving fresh grooves into the stone as another wave of agony rolled through him, stronger than the last, threatening to tear him apart from the inside.

The pain climbed higher. What had been agony became something beyond it, something so absolute that Sagiri could no longer separate one sensation from another. It felt as though every bone in his body was being cracked apart and reformed while his nerves were stretched across molten iron. His muscles locked so violently that his joints popped. Blood vessels burst beneath his skin.

The markings covering his body glowed and writhed, crawling across flesh like living brands. He screamed once. Then again. The sound echoed through the cave until even his voice began to fail him.

His vision turned white. Black spots flooded the edges. Relief seemed only a heartbeat away. Unconsciousness finally reached him. His eyes rolled back. His body slackened.

Then the Archive snapped him awake in the next moment, together with the pain. Knowledge flooded into his skull like a hammer blow. He woke with a gasp and a fresh scream already tearing from his throat. There would be no escape.

Every time darkness tried to claim him, something inside him dragged him back. He passed out again. Woke again. Passed out. Woke. Over and over. Sometimes he wasn't even sure if seconds had passed between them. His fingers clawed deeper into the stone until they left bloody grooves.

Fragments of rock littered the floor around him. At one point, he drove his forehead against the ground hard enough to crack the stone beneath him, desperate for any pain that wasn't the one consuming him

from within. It didn't help. The relics were tearing through him. The Archive was expanding faster than his mind could contain it. Ancient memories crashed against his consciousness in endless waves.

Millions of voices whispered. Countless lives brushed against his own. Through it all, he remained awake. Forced awake. Every heartbeat was another eternity. Every breath is another battle. And somewhere between screams and shattered thoughts, Sagiri began to understand the true horror of his situation. The pain was still getting worse.

The moment Koru stepped through the gates of the War Fortress, he stopped. His expression, calm until now, hardened. N'varu felt it immediately. The old Sandshade slowly turned his pupil-less eyes toward him.

"You fool." Koru snapped, flipping N'varu to look at him. The words landed with enough force to silence everyone nearby.

N'varu frowned.

"What now?" He asked. He had seen the beast break through the supreme chief's fortress roof. It carried the man. Zaira had then lifted Nvaru and Lira, and all three were first to be slowly lowered to the ground. They had not spoken then, but they all rushed to the square.

"What now?" Koru repeated. "The keeper is tearing himself apart in the middle of the desert, and you ask me what now?" The courtyard went silent. Banga looked between them. Kaka shifted uneasily. Lira froze, and N'varu's face darkened.

"You think I don't know that?"

"No." Koru took a step forward. "I think you knew exactly what would happen. You let him sacrifice for everyone, and now it's killing him." The accusation caused several people to stiffen. "You knew what he was carrying."

"You know nothing about what he carries," Nvaru said

"I know more than you." The answer came instantly. The temperature in the courtyard seemed to drop.

N'varu's eyes narrowed, his pupils going white, but Koru matched him immediately

For several seconds, neither man spoke. Then Koru pointed toward the distant desert.

"You should have stopped him years ago." The statement shocked everyone. Lira's head snapped toward him. Banga blinked, and even the Kai looked startled. Koru ignored them. "You should have forced him to stop."

N'varu's voice became dangerous.

"He is not a child."

"No, he isn't." Koru nodded. "That is exactly the problem."

The old Sandshade folded his arms.

"You spent years treating him like a warrior when he should have been treated like a disaster waiting to happen. You know the archive should not be repeatedly exposed to violence." The courtyard remained silent.

Koru continued.

"Every time he pushed too hard, you allowed it. Every time he refused guidance, you stepped aside. Every time he ignored his limits, you watched." N'varu's jaw tightened.

"And what would you have done?"

Koru laughed.

It was not a pleasant sound.

"I would have beaten him." Several people blinked. "I would have chained him to a mountain if necessary."

Lira looked horrified.

The old Sandshade pointed toward the desert again.

"Now look where kindness has gotten him. He is right now in so much pain. I think that's what you wanted, sandshade." Nvaru curled his fists, but he did not speak. Instead of being Sagiri's protector, he had let Sagiri protect him time and time again.

Then Koru's gaze shifted.

For the first time, he truly looked at Sagiri's squad.

His white eyes moved from face to face. Something strange entered his expression. Recognition. The squad noticed it immediately. Then Koru spoke.

"You lot are from the North." The words hit like a hammer. Every member of the squad froze. Kaka's eyes widened, and the Kai stared openly. Even N'varu looked surprised. The silence became suffocating.

Finally, Banga spoke.

"...How do you know that?"

Koru snorted.

"Because I have eyes."

"They are white," Kaka muttered before thinking.

To everyone's surprise, Koru barked a laugh. Then he pointed toward them. "Your accent. Your posture.

"The way you stand. like seasoned warriors. I assure you, even the kai is not fooled." He shook his head.

"You might fool Southerners. You do not fool me."

The Kai did not debate, and it was clear to see he had known all along, yet he let them be. Well, he was the kai of the south.

Koru looked almost disappointed.

"The North breeds wolves." His gaze lingered on each of them. "And wolves always recognize wolves." The statement sent another wave of silence through the courtyard.

"You should get ready to leave. Northerners killed my master. I could have already killed you if the keeper hadn't seen you as brothers. My grace will not last long." Koru snarled before he moved. In a second, he was gone. He was so fast it almost seemed like he was disappearing.

Chapter 345. KEEPER IN TROUBLE

It took Koru two days to find him. Two days of following disturbed dunes, shattered rock formations, and traces of power to finally find Sagiri.

When he finally reached the cave, Sagiri was curled against the stone, groaning in pain. He was breathing hard, and his fingers had long ago worn through the skin. Blood stained the rocks around him. The markings beneath his flesh still writhed. Every few moments, his body would spasm violently as another wave of pain tore through him.

Koru said nothing, and Zaria did not stop him when he approached Sagiri. She was a smart beast, and she knew he was not their enemy. Even so, the beast whimpered silently. It must have been agonizing for it to watch its master suffer with no means to help. Koru simply knelt beside him and drove two fingers into a point beneath Sagiri's collarbone. Then another beneath his shoulder. Then his neck. Then his wrist. Ancient, precise strikes.

A secret art.

It could not stop the pain, but it could make it bearable. Or so he hoped

"You look half dead." Koru mattered

Sagiri's body immediately relaxed. Not much. Barely enough to notice. But the tension in his muscles eased. The pain lessened, but it did not disappear. It was going on for months, if not weeks, for the pain to lessen.

Nothing could do that now. For several minutes, neither spoke. Only the wind outside and Sagiri's ragged breathing filled the cave. Finally, Koru broke the silence.

"What is the price?" Was the first thing Koru asked. The man was perhaps regretting accepting imprisonment. Was he too late? Sagiri didn't answer as he continued to pant weakly. Koru's eyes narrowed. "Your body cannot handle this much longer." Sagiri laughed weakly. There was no humor in it.

"It is none of your business. This is my fate." Sagiri snapped, and Koru's expression hardened. He was not in the mood to explain his cursed fate.

"What is the price? Tell me. You are now completely one with the echo. Its heart is mingled with yours. That happened overnight, plus the relics. I'm not your stupid sandshade. So tell me what the price is." The question carried more force this time. More authority.

Sagiri remained silent for several heartbeats. Then his eyes opened. The crimson glow within them seemed dimmer now. Tired. He was tired of being in constant pain for two days. The pain was far worse than the eardrop poison. It was pain that could have killed him, yet I had not let him escape it even for a moment.

"Long enough." His voice was hoarse. "...Long enough to balance the scales of the North," Sagiri said with a steady voice this time. The cave fell silent. Koru stared at him.

"The relics cannot stay in the North," Koru argued.

Sagiri did not answer this, and Koru continued.

"Their hearts are in the South." Koru's voice remained calm. "You should have known you could not leave the South." Another silence stretched between them. Then Sagiri slowly turned his head toward the cave entrance, where the desert stretched endlessly beyond.

"Yet some things cannot be forgiven." The words hung in the air. Koru did not immediately answer. He simply watched the young man before him. The son who was quite literally breaking himself apart. The Keeper. The Last N'folu. A fool. And perhaps the only man stubborn enough to challenge an entire continent while dying.

"I do not expect you to forgive. I have not forgiven either, but taking revenge at the cost of..."

"So then you agree." Sagiri cut him off

Koru studied him for a long moment before speaking again.

"Why?" Koru asked, sitting on the stone in a meditative position. Sagiri didn't look at him.

"Why what?" He said in a raspy voice. The pain was now manageable. Well, it was still bad, but compared to what he had already experienced, this was nothing.

"Why become Supreme Chief?" Koru asked. The question lingered between them. Sagiri remained silent for several breaths before answering.

"Because I needed the title. I am hungry for power, and what better position than standing at the top? Perhaps I am tired of people in power wanting to kill me," Sagiri answered with dry humour.

Koru's brow furrowed.

"You know you are lying. You have never cared about being in power. Don't play games with me. Taking this position will only make your path harder. So why, and for what?"

"To further my means." The answer was immediate. "... besides, I won't be sitting on that throne for long." Koru's expression darkened.

"You think the South cares about your intentions?" Sagiri said nothing. "You forced an entire city to acknowledge you." Koru's voice became sharper. "You forced the council to kneel. You took the position of Supreme Chief." He leaned forward slightly. "Do you know what happens now?" Sagiri finally looked at him.

"Three months." Koru nodded. "Maximum." The old Sandshade pointed at him. "Within three months, every chief, elder, and tribe in the South will expect you to assume the seat properly." His voice echoed softly through the cave. "And you cannot." Sagiri's jaw tightened.

"I know that."

"Do you also know that if you sit on that throne now, you die?" The words were blunt. Sagiri sighed. What could the man say that Sagiri was not already aware of?

"You need six months." Koru continued. "Minimum. Six months of meditation. Six months of seclusion. Six months of doing absolutely nothing except learning to survive what is already inside you." His eyes moved over the markings beneath Sagiri's skin.

"The relics are barely stable. The Archive is still expanding. Your body is falling apart." The cave grew quiet once more. Then Koru asked the question he already knew the answer to.

"And yet you intend to leave for the North before those three months are over." Sagiri's gaze drifted toward the desert beyond the cave entrance.

"Yes. Sagiri said," Koru closed his eyes briefly. It wasn't anger. It wasn't disappointment. It was exhaustion.

"You truly are your mother's son." Sagiri laughed weakly despite the pain. The movement immediately made him wince.

"That bad?" Koru opened his eyes.

"Worse." Then the old man folded his arms and stared at him. "The difference is that your mother usually had a plan." Sagiri remained silent. Koru's expression hardened.

"Tell me you have one too." Koru insisted.

"You need to have a plan that is not self-sacrificial or one that does not involve you dying. I ask that you do not go north before six months have elapsed. You will only be committing suicide." Koru answered himself after a while.

Koru looked at the boy again, and he was already asleep. Perhaps passed out.

Chapter 346: HIS ARRIVAL

It had been three days since Sagiri shook the core of Thazir, and he had not returned. His squad was still in the war fortress. Now that the Kai knew who they were, they loudly announced they had stopped hiding their identities, and they had told him where they had met Sagiri and a few stories about him back at the academy and the missions they held together, and how he came south.

"Brother has really suffered, yet he is still so kind," Azir said.

"Kind? Is this boy blind?" Kaka snickered.

"Where is he now??" Ulekai whined. After the second day, everyone had started to get restless. They needed to leave soon.

"So you boys knew he could die and still followed him?" The kai marveled. "Such an honorable bunch. Well, he has saved us a thousand times. It will be selfish to say no or let you southerners skin him alive." Kiuga said. Even so, he was restless. They needed to live the following day at the latest, or their presence would be missed in the north, too.

The War Fortress had become the center of it all. Kiuga sat with the rest of the squad in one of the strategy chambers while Kai stood near a window overlooking the city below. The man looked exhausted. Everyone did. The South was changing too quickly. Finally, the general broke the silence.

"This cannot continue." His voice drew everyone's attention.

"What cannot?" Kiuga asked. Zifara turned toward them.

"Sagiri's absence. His presence can no longer be ignored." Zifara folded his arms. "Three days ago, he forced the entire South to acknowledge him as Supreme Chief only to disappear."

"Not forced," Kaka muttered.

"Encouraged with several thousand floating blades," Kiuga added, and a few chuckles escaped before dying quickly. Kai remained serious.

"The distinction is irrelevant." He pointed toward the city. "The chiefs are waiting. The elders are waiting. The tribes are waiting." His expression hardened. "The South is waiting. The chair cannot remain empty, and the south can not continue in his absence." Nobody argued on this. They all knew it was true.

"Every day he remains absent, more problems appear." Zifara continued. "The council cannot make major decisions because nobody wishes to act without his approval." He shook his head.

"Even the Supreme Chief's former supporters have begun redirecting petitions to him." Zifara said.

"Such audacity." Kaka shook his head. "Courting death."

"It is a rumour, I have a feeling. Someone out there is vindictive." Kiuga said

"You are smart. Now, where is your man?" Zifara said.

"Good luck finding him then," Kiuga said in a quiet voice

"That is not the point," Kai answered immediately. "Whether he wants it or not, he is Supreme Chief now. The moment he claimed the title publicly, everything changed." The Kai looked at each of them in turn.

"He must sit at the council. He must attend tribal hearings. He must establish authority." Kaka snorted.

"Tell him that." "I intend to." Kai's answer surprised everyone. "Because if he doesn't, someone else will try to fill the vacuum."

"You think someone would challenge him?" N'varu asked, and the Kai laughed.

"Challenge him? No. Even I dare not." He looked toward the desert visible in the distance. "But power hates emptiness." His voice became thoughtful. "If the Supreme Chief never appears, eventually people will start acting in his name. Then others will start acting against his name. Then factions appear. He needs to assert his rule..." The squad exchanged glances. T

The Kai had barely finished speaking when shouting erupted from outside. The noise was distant at first. Then louder. Soldiers running. People yelling. Doors opening. The entire fortress seemed to come alive at once. Banga was already on his feet before the first guard burst into the room.

"The beast!" the man shouted. "The beast is back!" Chairs scraped across the floor. Everyone rushed from the chamber and up the stairs. By the time they reached the roof, dozens of soldiers had already gathered along the battlements. What they saw stole the breath from their lungs.

Zaira was moving through the outer city. The colossal beast flowed between buildings like a living river. From this height, its size became truly apparent. Entire streets vanished beneath its shadow. People crowded rooftops and walls to watch its passage.

Despite being black, the serpent's scales looked different beneath the midday sun. The darkness of its hide was not flat. Light slid across the scales in shifting patterns. Some reflected deep chestnut hues where the sunlight struck at certain angles. Others flashed with faint bronze and dark amber undertones hidden beneath the black. It was as if the beast carried traces of the desert itself within its scales.

Its name truly fits it.

Zaira.... Beauty

When it moved, those colours rippled across its body before vanishing back into darkness. The effect was mesmerizing. The scales near its spine reflected the sunlight like polished obsidian, while others seemed to drink the light entirely. Massive muscles rolled beneath the armoured hide with each movement. The city parted before it.

Zaira crossed the outer districts and passed through the gates into the inner city. The crowd scattered ahead of it while thousands gathered behind. Even now, the people remained wary of the creature that had once towered above the execution square with enough power to reduce the city to rubble.

"Where is he?" Ulekai asked quietly. Every eye searched the serpent's head. The usual figure standing atop it was nowhere to be seen. Kai's expression slowly darkened. Zaira continued toward the fortress at a steady pace.

The roof fell silent as Zaira's enormous head rose above the battlements. The serpent's crimson eyes swept across the gathered soldiers before it lowered itself toward the stone. Only then did they notice the figure standing upon its head. Sagiri. A collective breath caught in dozens of throats.

He looked terrible. His skin was unnaturally pale, almost colourless beneath the sunlight. The dark circles beneath his eyes were impossible to miss, and there was a stiffness to his movements that had never been there before. Even standing seemed to cost him effort. For a moment, nobody moved.

Then Zaira tilted its head slightly, and Sagiri stepped off, landing lightly on the roof. His knees almost buckled. Almost. Lira's expression immediately tightened. Kai's eyes narrowed. N'varu simply stared. Sagiri looked at the gathered faces and managed a faint smile that did little to hide how exhausted he was.

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting." His voice was lighter than his appearance suggested. The joke fell flat. Seeing what the last few days had done to him brought something else entirely.

"Why do you look like you are dying?" Kaka, of course, could not keep from asking.

"Perhaps I am dying," Sagiri said with dry humour. "But don't worry. I will drop you, boys, at the border and become a chief before I think of dying." Sagiri said with a forced smile.

Chapter 347. DEPARTURE

Sagiri sat on top of the supreme chief's fortress. Well, it was now his. Not officially, but he was the only one staying in the huge building alone.

By sunset, Sagiri had taken his place atop the Supreme Chief's fortress. Perched upon Zaira's massive head, he sat cross-legged against the backdrop of the darkening sky, unmoving as a statue. From that height, he could see all of Thazir. The inner city glowed beneath the fading light while the outer districts stretched toward the canyon walls beyond. People noticed him almost immediately. To be honest, it is hard to miss the massive beast he sat upon.

They pointed from rooftops, paused in marketplaces, gathered in streets and courtyards. Everywhere he looked, eyes eventually drifted upward. That was the point. His presence could not disappear again. Not now. Not after everything that had happened. The South needed to see its Supreme Chief. It needed to know he was here and needed to believe he was watching. Just like Koru and Zaira had advised him.

It was a huge responsibility he had taken upon his shoulders, but a necessary one.

So he remained where everyone could see him. Beneath the stillness, every second was a battle. Pain moved through him in endless waves, clawing through flesh, bone, and mind. The markings beneath his skin stirred constantly. The relics remained restless. The Archive continued to press against the limits of what his body could endure.

Outwardly, nothing showed. His breathing remained even. His posture never shifted. His expression stayed calm. From below, he looked like a ruler meditating beneath the stars. Only he knew that every moment of stillness required immense effort.

He would remain there through the night. Meditating. Stabilizing what he could. Letting the city grow accustomed to the sight of him. Before dawn, he would leave with the boys for Tagayia. He needed them to take a message to someone.

The thought almost made him laugh. Instead, he simply sat in silence while darkness settled over Thazir. Lamps gradually appeared throughout the city like scattered stars. The crowds below slowly thinned, though many still glanced upward from time to time. They would soon need to rest, and they were acting like disciplined kids as much as Sagiri could see. It would take them a while to get used to him.

Sweat soaked through Sagiri's clothes despite the cool night air. It gathered along his brow and neck before disappearing into the fabric beneath him. Every few minutes, a tremor threatened to pass through his body, and he had to crush it before it became visible. The pain was constant, and if he could be honest, it doubled at night. It had merely settled into a constant companion.

A slow, relentless thing gnawing at him from the inside. His muscles ached. His bones ached. Even his thoughts hurt. The Archive continued to move through his mind like an ocean pressing against a dam. Worse, he was beginning to notice other things. His body was weakening. He was growing weak, and he had a feeling he would keep getting weaker the more this continued.

He could not afford weakness.

He had not eaten since entering the Pool. Food now seemed like a distant pleasure he had experienced in the past. Earlier, Kaka had practically forced food into his hands, saying a man should eat and that he would beat him if he kept looking like a ghost. Some things really never change. Like Kaka's temper. Sagiri was beginning to think that was a good thing. At least he would expect him to be the same in all situations.

Sagiri had tried. He really had. One bite was all it took. The meat had tasted like mud. The bread had tasted like dirt. Every mouthful felt wrong. He had swallowed once, nearly vomited, and quietly stopped eating. Nobody had pressed the issue further.

They thought it was stress or exhaustion. He wished that was all it was. His stomach no longer felt hungry. That frightened him more than the pain. Hunger was normal. Hunger meant a body still knew what it needed. This felt different. As though something inside him had begun changing the rules. His fingers tightened slightly against his knees.

He, however, immediately relaxed them before anyone watching below could notice. The stars slowly crossed the sky above Thazir. The city slept, but Sagiri remained motionless. The sweat continued to build. The pain continued to grow louder and louder. Somewhere deep down, beneath all the meditation, he knew the truth. He was in trouble. His body was failing to keep pace with what he had become. Every instinct told him the same thing.

He needed months. Months of seclusion. Months of meditation. Months he did not have. Instead, before dawn, he would leave for Tagayia.

The sky was still dark when the boys gathered atop the War Fortress. Dawn lingered somewhere beyond the horizon, painting only the faintest grey along the edge of the desert. N'varu leaned against the battlements while Kiuga sat on the stone ledge with his arms folded. The others stood in line watching him. Zifara was there as well, dressed for the morning despite the hour.

Beside him stood Azir, fighting sleep and losing badly, yet stubbornly refusing to leave. Their attention remained fixed on the distant silhouette of the Supreme Chief's fortress rising above the city. Then movement stirred atop its highest roof after a few minutes. Zaira rose to twice his size when he was resting. The colossal serpent slowly uncoiled from where it had remained through the night.

Even from this distance, its size was overwhelming. Black scales caught the last remnants of moonlight as the beast lifted its head and looked across the sleeping city. A moment later, it moved. It was indeed, taking its time. The serpent flowed from the fortress roof and crossed the city with impossible grace for something so large.

Its immense body passed above streets and buildings while early risers stopped and stared upward. The closer it came, the quieter the roof became. Azir straightened immediately. Kai narrowed his eyes. The serpent finally reached the War Fortress and raised its head level with the roof. Only then did they see Sagiri standing atop it motionless, his cloak stirring gently in the wind. For several seconds, nobody moved. Then Zaira lowered its head toward the stone roof, offering its master passage.

Chapter 348: FAREWELLS

Azir was the first to move. The moment Sagiri stepped onto the roof, the boy rushed forward and threw his arms around him, almost throwing his weak body off its feet. He tried to speak, but his voice broke before the words could leave his mouth. Tears gathered in his eyes despite his obvious effort to hold them back. Sagiri rested a hand on his head and sighed.

"Pull yourself together, Azir. This is rather un-city lord behaviour ." Azir immediately scrubbed at his face, but did not move back far enough.

"I am together," he muttered, earning a doubtful look from everyone present. Sagiri's expression softened slightly.

"Watch the city while I'm gone. I will be back before you know it," Sagiri said, patting the boy's hair. Azir nodded fiercely, trying to pull himself together, which was of no use.

"I will. I will not fail you. You are yet to spar with me, so come back."

"I am the supreme chief now. Where else could I go?" Sagiri said with a forced laugh past his pain. His body was tender, even a touch, and the hug from Azir made him feel like he was going to break. Only then did Sagiri look toward Zifara.

"Watch the city for me," Sagiri said in a firm voice.

Kai inclined his head.

"I intend to." His gaze lingered on Sagiri for a moment. "Be back soon." Sagiri didn't answer immediately. Then he gave a small nod.

One by one, the boys turned toward the General and Azir. They saluted.

"Don't become enemies of the south when you rise in rank. I will have to kill you." Zifara said.

"Not if I kill you first if you become an enemy of Tagayia," Kaka answered immediately. The General smiled before he returned the gesture with solemn respect.

"I will expect nothing less from you." Zifara said.

Azir, on the other hand, was trying desperately to stand tall and strong despite the tears threatening to return. He saluted back, and it was funny to watch.

Satisfied, the boys climbed onto Zaira's lowered head. Sagiri remained behind for a few moments longer. The wind tugged at his cloak as he looked over the sleeping city one final time. Then he stepped onto the serpent's head as well.

Zaira slowly lifted itself, finally. For a brief moment, the colossal beast paused. Its crimson eyes settled upon the General and Azir. The enormous serpent lowered its head ever so slightly, almost like a nod. Then it turned toward the gate. The scales along its back caught the first hints of dawn. The beast simply began descending from the War Fortress, carrying its passengers away.

The journey lasted half a day. Zaira moved with effortless speed across the desert, its immense body flowing over dunes, rocky ridges so fast the boy boys had to hold tight not to fall. The South gradually faded behind them.

By midday, they finally reached the barren lands that separated Tagayia from the South. The change was impossible to miss. The land looked wounded. Vast plains of grey stone stretched in every direction, broken only by jagged rock formations and deep fissures carved into the earth. Nothing grew here. No birds crossed the sky. No beasts wandered the ground. Even the wind sounded different, carrying a hollow whistle through the endless emptiness.

It was a place neither side truly claimed. Too harsh for settlement. Too empty for prosperity. Yet it stood between two worlds. To the south lay the deserts and tribes that Sagiri now ruled. Beyond the barren lands, far in the distance, lay Tagayia and everything waiting for them there. Zaira finally slowed. The massive serpent raised its head slightly as its crimson eyes scanned the horizon before it stopped.

Zaira came to a halt upon a stretch of cracked stone overlooking the barren lands. The serpent lowered its head slightly as the wind swept across the empty wasteland. Sagiri rose from where he had been sitting and looked toward the distant horizon.

"This is as far as I go." The boys exchanged glances.

"What do you mean?"

Sagiri pointed ahead.

"Tagayia is only ten vaara from here." His gaze remained fixed on the distant north. "Any further and Zaira could be seen." Nobody argued with that. A beast the size of Zaira crossing into northern territory would not go unnoticed. Sagiri turned toward Kiuga.

"Before you enter the academy, drop a message." Kiuga raised an eyebrow.

"To whom?"

"Salka." Sagiri's expression remained unreadable. "Tell the one you serve to be wary of his ears." The words caused Kiuga's amusement to disappear.

"And tell Salka..." For a brief moment, something softer crossed Sagiri's face. "Tell him I will see him in three months." Kiuga studied him for a moment before nodding.

"I don't know what you mean, but I can do that." Sagiri gave a small nod in return. Then he looked toward the horizon once more. Beyond those barren lands lay Tagayia. He had unfinished business.

The mood grew lighter once the decision had been made. Kiuga was the first to step forward, driving a fist lightly into Sagiri's shoulder. "Try not to become emperor of another country before we get back." He snorted and followed with a pat on the back.

One by one, the boys offered their farewells.

Two hours earlier, they had changed back into their War Academy uniforms, replacing the clothes of the South with something familiar to the North.

Eventually, Zaira lowered its head toward the barren ground below. The boys began jumping down one after another, preparing to cross the remaining distance to Tagayia on foot. Sagiri watched them go.

Then, without warning, arms wrapped around him. He stiffened instantly. Lira. The sudden contact should have hurt. Everything hurts lately. His skin was so sensitive that even clothing felt abrasive. Instinctively, he braced himself for another spike of agony.

Instead, the opposite happened. The moment she hugged him, a strange sensation spread through his body. It felt as though he had been dropped into cool water after standing beneath a desert sun. The relentless heat beneath his skin eased. The pain started fading to a distant hum in his bone. His racing thoughts slowed. The pressure behind his eyes lessened.

For the first time in days, he could breathe without feeling as though something was tearing through his chest. Sagiri froze completely. Lira seemed just as surprised. Neither of them moved. Around them, the others stopped and stared. Even Zaira turned one crimson eye toward them. The cool sensation continued spreading through him, washing across nerves that had known nothing but pain since the Pool.

Sagiri blinked once. Then twice. Because for the first time since entering the Pool, something had actually helped.

The relief lasted only a few seconds before Lira's legs gave out. Sagiri caught her automatically as she collapsed against him. The color drained from her face almost instantly. Around them, the others froze. Sagiri stared down at her in silence. The pain inside him had lessened. By nearly half. He knew better than to believe that was a coincidence.

His eyes lingered on Lira's pale face as the realization settled in.

Chapter 349: THE SISTERS

Two little girls stood beside a waterfall, one was taller than the other, perhaps to show their age difference. White water thundered from the cliffs above and vanished into a dark pool below, filling the valley with mist and noise. They had been warned all their lives never to enter the water, though no one had ever explained why.

The elder sister always obeyed the warning and was satisfied.

"Rika? What do you think would happen if I jumped into the waterfall? I mean, I know how to swim," the little one said with excitement.

"Rina, you can't. What if it does not have a bottom and you never return?" Rika said, holding Rina's hand and pulling her back on instinct as if she was going to jump at any moment.

"But then we will never know. Perhaps it is shallow, and I will float right back." Rina insisted.

"If you keep saying such nonsense, I will tell Mom and Dad, and they will not allow you to come play here anymore," Rika threatened.

"Fine, fine. I am just playing. You know I am just playing," Rina said, but the sparkle in her eyes was clear. She was deeply thinking about whatever she was saying, and not even Rika was fully fooled. Every day they returned to the falls, and every day the younger drifted closer to the water while the elder watched from a safe distance. One was clearly cautious by nature, and the other carried the restlessness of a bird that hated cages.

Years passed, and the girls grew a little older. They were now young maidens of thirteen and fourteen seasons. Rina appeared even more untamable than before, and the growing distance in their relationship could be seen whenever Rika sat far from the waterfall weaving baskets or doing something useful. Rina, on the other hand, was always off fighting boys or getting into trouble. It often seemed that the only reason Rika came near the water at all was to make sure her sister did not jump to her death.

One evening, with the sun painting the mist gold, the younger sister stood upon a rock hanging over the pool.

"Don't," Rika warned. She had only looked away for a moment, and the next thing she saw was Rina standing upon the sharpest rock where a single jump would carry her into the forbidden part of the waterfall.

Rina smiled.

"I've always wondered what it feels like."

Then she jumped.

The waterfall swallowed her instantly.

The elder rushed to the edge and waited. Fear slowly gave way to terror as the pool remained empty. For the first time, she imagined a world without her sister in it. Yes, the girl was feral, but that did not mean she wanted her dead.

Minutes passed.

Then more.

Rika panicked.

She wanted to jump in after her sister, but she was a coward. She had always known she was a coward. Even now, as she stood on the edge of the waterfall, her legs refused to move. Her sister could be dying, yet she could not bring herself to leap. She hated her weakness, but she could not take a step.

Then the surface broke suddenly and the younger emerged laughing, her hair plastered to her face, delighted by her adventure. She climbed from the water still smiling, only for that smile to fade when she saw her sister's expression. Relief, anger, fear, and love all battled within it at once.

Rika told their parents everything the moment they returned home, and Rina was promptly forbidden from ever returning to the waterfall. For a while, Rika believed the punishment would finally tame her sister, but Rina only seemed to grow wilder with age. As the seasons passed and the girls became young women, Rina's reckless adventures only multiplied.

She climbed cliffs, disappeared into forests, challenged older boys to fights and races, and returned home with stories that spread through the village like fire through dry grass. Somehow, she always survived. People laughed at her antics, admired her courage, worried over her safety, and spoke her name constantly. She was not acting as a young maiden at all or following the rules of society, yet somehow she always found favor in people's eyes. Rika had always carried herself with dignity and could even be called the fairest maiden in the village, yet she found herself walking in the shadow of her feral, uncultured sister.

At first, Rika paid little attention, but slowly she began noticing things she wished she had not. Whenever Rina vanished, their mother could not sleep. Whenever she returned, their father would scold her before embracing her. The villagers praised her spirit, forgave her mistakes, and made her the center of every conversation. Meanwhile, Rika did everything she was supposed to do. She worked,

obeyed, helped, listened, and remained dependable, yet her efforts passed unnoticed because she never caused enough trouble to demand attention.

At first, the feeling was small, a passing sting she quickly buried. Then it returned more often. With every story told about Rina, every laugh shared at her expense, every worried glance their parents reserved for their troublesome daughter, something dark began taking root inside Rika. She told herself she was merely annoyed. Then she convinced herself she was simply tired.

But bitterness is patient. It grows quietly beneath the surface until it becomes impossible to ignore. One day, Rika realized she no longer smiled when Rina entered a room. Her laughter irritated her. Her successes angered her. Her very existence felt like a shadow cast over Rika's own life. And by the time she understood what had happened, the bitterness had already become something far uglier. Without meaning to, without even noticing when it began, Rika had started to hate the sister she had once been terrified of losing.

She once even wished she had let her die in that waterfall. The thought should have scared her, but she entertained it.

Her breaking point came when the Choosing happened. She had been filled with rage when the most esteemed boy of their generation proposed a betrothal to Rina, but the Choosing... the Choosing was something she would never forget.

Rina was not worthy of the Choosing.

Chapter 350: FESTIVITIES

A month later, Thazir wore an entirely different face. A month after Sagiri became chief and a month after he escorted his friends north. For a month, he had been in seclusion, too. The day after Lira eased his pain, it returned with a vengeance. By sunset, the relief was gone, and by dawn the agony had become so unbearable that Sagiri knew he could not allow anyone to see him. He handed temporary authority over the city to Zifara, ordered the Chief's Fortress sealed, and disappeared into seclusion.

"Why did you announce having the relics anyway? Someone might know you are weakened." Zifara was frustrated.

"Just keep the city in order. I need a few days. Even a daring killer won't dare come at me now. My beast is not weakened even so." Sagiri said.

"It is not like telling anyone you are weakened works in my favour. " Zifara had said. Sagiri's seclusion had begun then. No one was permitted inside the chiefs' fortress. Even the chiefs' shadows had been taken out. Just Sagiri, Koru, and Zaira. Not even Azir.

Above the fortress, Zaira perched upon the highest roof and remained there for days without moving.

Inside, Sagiri endured hell. For the first two weeks, it felt as though he had been set ablaze from within. Fire coursed through his veins, burned beneath his skin, and gnawed at his bones.

Sleep became impossible because the moment exhaustion dragged him into unconsciousness, the pain would rip him awake again. More than once, he collapsed onto the cold stone floor, trembling, fingers clawing at the ground until his nails broke. Food became useless. Water offered little relief. Entire days vanished into a haze of sweat, shaking muscles, and silent suffering.

The city believed their Supreme Chief was meditating. Some thought he was mastering the relics. Others whispered that he was communing with the Archive. None of them knew that while Thazir carried on with his daily life, Sagiri spent every waking moment fighting simply to survive the power he had forced into a body never meant to contain it.

Now, however, the city seemed to hum with anticipation. Colorful banners stretched between rooftops, fluttering lazily in the warm evening breeze while lanterns of dyed glass hung from poles and balconies, waiting for nightfall to set them ablaze with color. Market streets overflowed with merchants selling sweets, carved trinkets, bright fabrics, and festival masks, their voices blending into a cheerful roar that echoed through the city.

Children darted through the crowds with painted cheeks and ribbons tied around their wrists while musicians tested drums and flutes in the squares, filling the air with fragments of songs that would not fully come alive until tomorrow. The scent of roasting meat, sweet pastries, and spiced tea drifted through every district. Even the stone buildings seemed transformed beneath garlands of flowers and woven streamers.

Workers rushed to finish decorations while families gathered on rooftops and balconies to admire the preparations below. As the sun slowly descended toward the horizon, thousands of lanterns waited patiently for darkness, promising that once night arrived, the city would shine like a field of fallen stars.

It was the eve of celebration, that rare moment when an entire city seemed united by excitement, and everywhere one looked, there was laughter, color, and the feeling that something important was about to begin.

The celebration could not be delayed forever. What had begun as a proposal from the council had quickly spread across the South until every tribe, every settlement, and every city had embraced it. It was to be a festival welcoming Sagiri as the new Supreme Chief of the south and Keeper.

The problem was that the man they intended to celebrate was still hidden inside the Chief's Fortress. For nearly a month, he had remained in seclusion, fighting a battle no one else could see. Yet there were some duties that even he could not ignore. A Supreme Chief could not miss his own ascension festival. The people needed to see him.

The tribes expected it.

The council demanded it. It could seem they were not willing to offer him any rest. And so, several days before the festivities were set to begin, the sealed doors of the fortress finally opened. Word spread through Thazir faster than wildfire. The Supreme Chief was emerging. Few knew that he was cutting his seclusion short, and even fewer still understood the cost. Because while the city prepared for music, feasts, and celebration, Sagiri was still very much in pain. The fire inside him had not gone out. He had merely learned how to sit in the flames without screaming. The mask would have to hold a little longer. At least until the South finished celebrating the ruler it believed had already conquered his demons.

Sagiri stood atop Zaira's head as the beast overlooked the awakening city below. Dawn painted Thazir in shades of gold, but the warmth never seemed to reach him. He looked thinner than he had a month ago. His cheeks were slightly hollow, his skin pale enough to make the dark circles beneath his eyes stand out sharply. Even standing appeared to require effort. The wind tugged at his clothes, and for a moment it seemed as though it might carry him away with it.

Beside him stood Koru, his expression unreadable as he studied the young man he had spent the last month watching get tormented. He felt pity for him more than anything. He had carried messages between Sagiri and Zifara, handled matters of state that could not wait, and watched helplessly as Sagiri endured agony that should have killed him. Now, seeing him upright again did little to ease his concerns.

"If someone wanted to kill you tonight," Koru said flatly, "I am convinced they could." Sagiri gave a weak snort that barely qualified as a laugh. Even that seemed to tire him. His breathing remained slow and measured, not out of calmness but necessity. Every breath cost him energy.

He looked less like the man who had forced the South to kneel and more like a corpse that had simply forgotten to lie down. Yet his crimson eyes remained unchanged. They still carried that stubborn refusal to yield. Koru noticed it and sighed.

"You should still be in bed; who cares about a celebration. They will be disappointed, but they will live." Koru said. People from all over Thazir had gathered, and the city was packed. Some now wanted to put a face to the man riding an ancient beast. This would determine if all the south accepted him and not just Thazir. Even more, he knew he had to travel to all the Azareen Capitals, too.

"I have a celebration to attend." Sagiri's voice was hoarse.

"You have an execution to postpone," Koru corrected. "Your own."

"You are always so negative," Sagiri said silently. Even so, he knew the man was right. He was not like N'varu, who lied to him. For a moment, neither spoke. Below them, Thazir prepared to welcome its new ruler.

"I will protect you. But don't overreact or do anything stupid. I have no patience for fools.

"You know I am the supreme chief, right, and the keeper," Sagiri said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Then you act like both, and we will be fine. You still need another month at least before you can even think of using your strength." Koru snapped.

"I know." Sagiri sighed. He knew what predicament he was in more than anyone.