

## KEEPER 351

### Chapter 351: IT BEGINS

The celebration continued long past midday. By this time, what had begun as a small gathering at dawn had now become a sea of people. Every street, every balcony, every rooftop, and every wall overlooking the festival grounds was occupied. There was no room to even look at one's feet. Travelers from distant lands of the south stood shoulder to shoulder with the citizens of Thazir.

It was the perfect picture of a festival. Merchants abandoned their stalls to watch. Children sat atop their fathers' shoulders, and even the surrounding canyons marred into the walls of the city had become crowded with spectators hoping to catch a glimpse of the man who owned a beast.

Music filled the air without pause. Drums thundered, and the sound somehow reminded Sagiri of the festivities of the north. Dancers spun through the streets. Feasts stretched across entire squares. Yet despite the joy, everyone knew the true purpose of the day had not yet arrived. The festival grounds had been built around a massive stone platform overlooking the city. Upon it stood dozens of seats reserved for chiefs, elders, and honored guests. Above them all sat a single seat. Larger. Higher. Untouched since the celebrations had begun.

The Seat of the Supreme Chief.

As the sun climbed overhead and the final performances came to an end, a hush slowly spread across the festival. Conversations faded. Musicians lowered their instruments. One by one, thousands of eyes turned toward the great staircase leading to the platform. It was finally time. The Chiefs rose from their seats. Elders straightened their robes. The crowd parted as guards opened a path through the center of the square. And there, hidden behind a calm expression and steady posture perched on Zaira, Sagiri prepared to take his place as the most honored guest of the festival.

None of the thousands gathered below could see how exhausted he was.

"You'd better wear your most lovely face behind your mask and go let your people see you," Koru said.

"I don't think they have waited enough," Sagiri said sarcastically. "They made me wait a year to even enter the city. I should keep them waiting for a week."

"Why not keep them waiting six months so hell can break loose?" Koru returned with sarcasm of his own. Sagiri sneakered.

"You give slightly better advice than my sandshade," Sagiri said.

"He even left you sick and went North. Such a sandshade." Koru's nose turned upwards. He always changed his tone to one of distaste when he talked about N'varu. He could still not agree with Sagiri's plan of letting N'varu return north.

"He needs to bring all his men with him, and I need them when I go north to kill that man in the supreme chief's council."

"It is still stupid. Now I am stuck babysitting and doing half of your tasks. You should have stayed with your cowardly dad and stubborn mother." Koru said.

"My father is not a coward. How do you know my parents?" Sagiri asked.

"Who do you think left you in those two's care? So they finally got married? Weird match-up." Koru shook his head. Sagiri did not know how Koru met his parents.

"Tell me how you met Bakuru and Rusha? I should bring them south soon."

"You have a festival to attend." Koru snapped. "Or do you want to wait till it's dark so no one can see your unchiefly look."

Down below the welcoming drum had long gone silent, and everyone was clearly holding their breath waiting for Sagiri's arrival. A moment before the silence could become uncomfortable, something stirred atop the Chief's Fortress. Thousands of heads turned as Zaira slowly lifted its massive head from where it had been resting. The colossal serpent uncoiled itself with deliberate grace, scales glinting beneath the afternoon sun.

Then, at a silent command from its master, the beast released a roar. The sound rolled across Thazir like thunder. It echoed from walls, rooftops, and towers, sweeping through the city with enough force to

silence every lingering conversation. Children froze, and everyone stopped breathing. Many had now heard of the beast or seen it from a distance. They had also heard of the fi Sagiri pulled, and they were beside themselves wanting to see for themselves the last N'folu, keeper, and supreme chief.

Even seasoned warriors felt a shiver crawl down their spines. The roar lingered long after it ended, announcing to the entire South that its Supreme Chief was coming.

"You are teaching the beast bad manners," Koru said before he spoke to the beast in the way he always did. The way he spoke to Myama and his mate. In sagiri's absence, he had been teaching the beast.

Then Zaira began to move. Kiru remained behind Sagiri, dressed in all white, a harsh contrast to the dark clothes Sagiri wore. It was clear he was there as his sandshade and bodyguard.

Despite its immense size, the serpent flowed through the city with an almost unnatural elegance. Streets had been cleared for its passage long before the festival began, and now the beast occupied that space like a river reclaiming its course. Its body wound between buildings and through avenues while countless citizens pressed themselves to the edges of the roads to watch.

Some stared in awe, others pointed excitedly, and many simply stood speechless. Some had seen the beast before, but seeing it in the bright light of day was something else entirely. Sunlight danced across scales so black they seemed carved from obsidian, while faint chestnut and bronze hues surfaced whenever the light struck them just right.

The serpent's crimson eyes remained fixed ahead as it approached the celebration square. People bowed as it passed. Others dropped to one knee. A few children waved enthusiastically from rooftops and balconies. And above it all, standing upon Zaira's head, was Sagiri. Cloaked in dark robes that shifted in the wind, he appeared calm and untouchable from a distance.

The city saw a ruler arriving to claim his place; they did not see the effort it took him simply to remain upright. By the time Zaira entered the square, tens of thousands of eyes were already waiting. The beast raised its head slightly, towering over the crowd as it approached the great platform, and a wave of wonder swept through the gathered people like a living thing.

The beast roared again when it reached the square before it lowered its head to allow Sagiri to descend.

Koru was first to alight, and he took his position to the side. Sagiri paused for a moment, anticipating the lengthy jump with his now sensitive body. He sank to a crouch and finally jumped, managing to land gracefully. Even that took a lot of his strength.

"Go play." He said in a strong voice, patting Zaira's huge head. The beast blinked its huge eyes before its head rose. With another obedient screech, it turned swiftly and headed for one side of the wall. Now that Sagiri was no longer perched on it. It was not careful in its movement, and with one violent jump into the air, the beast was gone. It took it only a second to cover the massive distance to the wall. It turned around once before it disappeared. The move was scary. Seeing such a huge beast move that fast.

Only then did Sagiri finally move.

It was time for the festivities to finally begin.

## Chapter 352: MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

The moment Sagiri stepped onto the first stair, the entire square bowed. Tens of thousands of people lowered themselves at once until it seemed as though a wave had swept through the city. The Warriors dropped to one knee as it is customary, and Common citizens lowered their heads.

Sagiri was not used to the gesture, but he did not falter in his steps. So this is how it feels to be feared and respected? No bad.

The only sounds that remained were the hearts racing and the steady rhythm of Sagiri's footsteps. He climbed the staircase slowly, his nclack cloak pilling behind him. Each step felt heavier than the last, though nobody watching could tell. The platform waited above. The high seat waited above.

The seat that belonged to the Supreme Chief. At last, he reached the top. Koru was already there, standing behind the chair to the left, his expression calm and unreadable. On the right stood Zifara, the War General, clad in ceremonial armor and carrying himself with the discipline of a man accustomed to battlefields rather than festivals. Neither spoke. Sagiri turned and lowered himself into the high seat. The crowd remained bowed. For several moments, silence ruled the square. Then Sagiri finally opened his mouth.

"You may rise," Sagiri said after a long moment. The words carried across the festival grounds, and the crowd obeyed. Thousands of people straightened at once and looked toward the platform. Sagiri's crimson eyes swept across them.

A month ago, these same people had demanded his execution. Today, they had decorated an entire continent in his honor.

The irony was not lost on him.

The celebrations continued after Sagiri took his seat. One performance followed another, each tribe determined to outdo the last. Drummers from the eastern settlements filled the square with thunderous rhythms that seemed to shake the stone beneath everyone's feet. Dancers clad in flowing desert silks spun through the open grounds below the platform, their movements weaving stories of ancient migrations, forgotten battles, and the birth of the South itself. Spearmen performed mock duels so fast that their weapons became silver blurs beneath the afternoon sun. Musicians played flutes carved from desert bone while singers with powerful voices recounted the deeds of legendary chiefs long since returned to the sands. The crowd cheered after every performance, and though Sagiri remained composed upon the high seat, the festival seemed determined to celebrate him whether he approved of it or not.

He pretended to be looking intently, but deep down, he was screaming in agony. The entertainment part finally ended, and they moved to the gift-giving part. Then came the gifts. One by one, the chiefs approached the platform.

The Chief of the Tavhiri tribe presented a cloak woven from the silk of rare desert spiders, a garment said to repel heat and cold alike.

The Chief of the Mazukus or gifted a ceremonial blade whose edge gleamed like polished silver. Sagiri could sense hostility from him. After all, he killed his brother. The sword felt like a message more than a gift, but Sagiri did not care for that. If the man wished to fight him, then he would go ahead and try.

The river settlements brought pearls gathered from hidden underground lakes.

The mountain's smaller clans offered gemstones carved with the symbols of the five tribes. Others presented ancient scrolls, spices, weapons, gold, and artifacts that had remained within their bloodlines for generations.

Each received a nod from Sagiri before returning to their seat.

The pile of gifts eventually became so large that servants were forced to carry them away to make room for more. As the sun slowly drifted lower in the sky and the final gift was received, Elder Maresha slowly rose from his seat among the wandering members.

The old man cleared his throat.

"I believe there remains one important matter, my chief." A hush settled over the platform. Many elders immediately looked amused. Several chiefs suddenly became very interested.

Sagiri immediately knew he was not going to enjoy whatever came next. Maresha bowed respectfully.

"The South now has a man Supreme Chief." The elder spread his arms. "The city prospers. The tribes are united. The people have accepted their ruler." His eyes twinkled.

"Yet a chief cannot be without a Kun."

Sagiri sighed. All that speech was to tell him to have a wife? A ripple passed through the crowd. Several people laughed. Others nodded seriously. The elder continued as though discussing military logistics.

"It would be improper. It would be irresponsible." Even more nodding. "It would also be rather embarrassing for a young chief not to have a kun." This time, the laughter became impossible to suppress. Maresha looked directly at Sagiri. "Therefore, I humbly suggest that our Supreme Chief begin considering marriage."

The square erupted. The chiefs laughed, and the elders started offering opinions before being asked. The crowd immediately became louder than it had been all day. And for the first time since arriving in the south, Sagiri found himself facing an enemy he had not prepared for.

"I am not interested in marriage."

The words had barely left Sagiri's mouth when two coughs sounded at the same time.

Cough.

Cough.

Sagiri slowly turned his head. Behind his seat, Koru was suddenly studying the sky with great interest. On the other side, Zifara was examining a banner as though it contained the secrets of the universe. The crowd immediately burst into laughter.

Even Elder Maresha looked pleased.

Zifara stepped forward before Sagiri could continue.

"Elder Maresha, our Chief has not even enjoyed the festivities yet, and already you intend to marry him off?"

The crowd laughed again. The old elder folded his arms.

"Exactly."

"What do you mean exactly?"

"Won't taking a maiden today make the celebration even more merry?"

"That is the decision of the supreme chief. Not yours." Zifara said. The two stared at one another.

Maresha refused to retreat, and neither did Zifara.

"A Chief without a Kun is like a fortress without walls. A fortress without walls is easy to breach. Without its walls, we can say it is a poorly designed fortress." Several elders nodded in agreement. Maresha continued relentlessly. "The South requires stability. The South requires heirs." Several people nodded.

"The South requires continuity." More nodding.

"The South requires..." Maresha went to say, but Sagiri cut him off

"The South requires you to stop plotting my marriage during a festival." He said. For the first time, he did not know what to answer. He wished the enemy this time was an assassin, but a marriage. He did not know how to get out of it. Someone must have plotted this meticulously to get their daughter by his side.

The crowd erupted into laughter. For nearly ten minutes, the elder continued presenting reasons why Sagiri should immediately begin considering suitable candidates while Zifara argued against every single point. Koru wisely remained silent.

Finally, Sagiri raised a hand, and the argument stopped. His crimson eyes moved across the gathered chiefs and elders. Then his expression softened slightly.

"I am yet to mourn." The square grew quiet. "I may yet mourn my dead parents." The laughter vanished completely. Sgiri was cornered, but what they did not know was that it takes two to play, and he was not a child anymore. He was now like a relic that had lived centuries. This childish stunt was not going to get o him;

"My tribe is gone. The N'folu no longer exist except through me." A heavy silence settled over the festival grounds. Sagiri looked toward the distant horizon, making sure he looked as sad as possible. "It would be immoral for me to take a wife before I mourn them for at least half a year or three months."

"I will mourn my parents." His voice remained calm.

"I will mourn my tribe," he said, looking directly at Maresha. "And I will do so for at least three months." The old elder held his gaze for several moments before finally bowing his head.

"Then this elder will wait three months." Elder Maresha bowed slightly. The crowd laughed once more. Damn! The man was a hard nut to crack.

"Now may the celebrations begin. Eat until you're full and make a dent in my chiefly reserves. Failure to which I will let my beast eat you," Sagiri announced, and people froze at the last statement before Koru laughed to save the situation, and finally, everyone joined in.

"Too soon, you idiot." Koru mattered.

### Chapter 353: BROTHER

Sagiri sat on the high seat watching the celebrations. He was the man of the hour anyway. Ever since the marriage proposal, every high-ranking man had come to him to introduce their daughter. He had seen more women than he had in his lifetime on a single day.

The cunning foxes!

All he had to nod before the next one was thrown at him. Fathers could not wait to get a piece of the N'folu blood, could they?

As evening hit, it was finally time for the feast, and the streets were filled with food. Sagiri finally stood, and Zifara and Koru followed after him.

"Where is Azir?" Sagiri finally asked.

"I let him handle the festivities. He is swamped trying to make your day good..."

"Big brother!!" At the moment, Azir came running, before he stopped himself and tried to walk slowly, but the slow running walk was even more undignifying than the run. He looked neat even so dressed in ceremonial attire.

"I am so hungry. Come, I'll show you what I make for you personally," Azir said as soon as he reached Sagiri and began dragging him away. Sagiri had long given up on scolding the boy. He could now understand why even Zifara had stopped scolding the boy and let him go wild.

They entered one of the tallest buildings in the outer city and climbed floor after floor until they were at the top. Even the act of climbing the stairs was painful for Sagiri, but he gritted his teeth and let himself be dragged away. The moment they reached the top floor, Sagiri finally understood why the boy was late. He must have kept this place a secret because only Wibo stood by dressed in a server and warrior uniform. They must have worked for days to make the place look how it did. It was decorated with all sorts of flowers, and on the balcony, meat was burning away, giving a delicious scent.

"This is the surprise I made for big brother. I know you have been sick, so I made this. I searched the entire south for all this food. It is good for restoring health." Azir said, scratching the back of his head as if he was shy now that he had put in all this work.

Sagiri looked at the scene, and he could not help but smile slightly. In fact, the festival today might have been a welcome for him, but what Azir had prepared was more genuine, and it felt more welcoming for him and warm.

"Azir, you must have worked hard," Sagiri said after a while, and the boy turned to him, smiling from ear to ear.

"It is nothing. I just thought you would love peace and a place to watch the city without being disturbed. At night you will see the festival..."

"Thank you, Azir, you are indeed a worthy young brother of mine," Sagiri said, and the place fell into deep silence. The gesture had indeed warmed his heart and reminded him more of Rusha and Bakuru. They always took care of him and noticed things that made him uncomfortable without him having to ask. Back then, he had wanted a younger brother, but Rusha could not have a child of her own, so Sagiri could only fantasize about having a younger sibling. He was the only one who grew up as an only child. Having many children after all is a sign of wealth.

Now looking at Azir and how the boy always went lengths for him even though he was stronger. Way stronger than him made him feel warm. He almost had him killed to get him sleeping herbs, and now he had missed almost half the festival just to prepare a feast for him. If Sagiri could have had a brother, then Azir filled all his fantasies of a brother and a sibling he had.

He was still lost in thought, oblivious to the weight of the words he had just said, when he heard a snuffle beside him.

"You called me brother." Azir sniffled, wiping away tears before he threw himself at Sagiri and wrapped him in a crushing hug.

"You have gone and done it." Zifara sighed deeply from behind sagiri.

"So Lordly behaviour," Sagiri said, but he did not move to pry the boy away. After enduring the festivities torture, he needed an embrace too. Besides, the boy had outdone himself, and he could let him act unlike a city lord for a few seconds. He patted the boy's head a few times, letting him weep for a bit. There was no time he had seen the boy when he had not ended up in tears.

"Azir, aren't you going to show your brother to a seat and give him the food you prepared?" Zifara said after a while.

Azir finally managed to pull himself together and showed Sagiri to his seat on the balcony, where three other seats were. The four main sat around the already well-done meat. Azir got into serving Sagiri immediately.

Sagiri had not had any appetite for food for a while. Not that hunger could keep him now. Well, he could go two weeks without food. He had realized since he started his pain seclusion. Now, however, looking at Azir's expectant eyes, he forced himself to take the plate of the tender piece of meat.

The meat did not taste like mud to Sagiri's surprise, and he checked and swallowed. Even Koru had expected him to throw it right out since it was not soup, which was all he had been taking for a month.

"Delicious. What meat is this?" Sagiri asked.

"I asked the prince of tides to get me the toothless fish," Azir said with pride.

"Hasn't the fish gone extinct?" Koru asked.

"Well, mostly, but I can be found deep and deep in the sea. It is hard to catch and The Prince of Tides two years back, so he is keeping them himself. He has six now, and they all cost a leg and a city. He says he will put them back in the sea. They have healing qualities, and he is not selling them for food. But then I told him I would put in a good word for him to big brother, and he agreed." Azir said proudly.

"Here I thought you were doing it for the love of your brother. You are actually selling him in exchange for a fish," Koru said, and laughter erupted from the men at the table.

"I will be sure to thank the prince of tides myself. Pass me more." Sagiri said, and Azir was beside himself trying to feed Sagiri to death.

The four ate, and even Wibo joined at Sagiri's request. I was peaceful, and he could see the city from above as he ate away. It had been a while since he enjoyed food, and even the herbal medicinal soup Azir prepared made him feel rejuvenated.

Perhaps it was not that bad to have a brother.

#### Chapter 354: BEAST APPROVAL

Most of the food had already disappeared, a testament to how much punishment Sagiri's body had endured recently. Zifara leaned back in his chair, swirling a cup of tea while studying the city below. Koru was seated opposite him, his broad frame taking up half his chair as he worked through another plate of meat. Sagiri sat between them in silence, his amber eyes fixed on the sea of lights beyond the balcony.

The three appeared relaxed to any observer, but the conversation taking place was anything but casual.

"The marriage proposal didn't appear out of nowhere," Zifara finally said, breaking the silence.

"Obviously, someone pushed it. Have never seen such an obvious stunt," Koru grunted his agreement.

"And someone was confident enough to believe their daughter could become a Kun," Sagiri said and the word kun hung in the word hung heavily in the air. Becoming Sagiri's wife was one thing. Becoming a Kun was another entirely. It came with influence, status, and proximity to one of the most important figures in the realm.

No ambitious family would ignore such an opportunity.

"Which means they expected the proposal to succeed," Zifara continued thoughtfully. "Or they expected to gain something even if it failed." Koru tore another piece of meat apart with little effort.

"The question is who." Zifara spoke again. His eyes narrowed.

"Most chiefs know Sagiri isn't interested in marriage," Koru said

"Exactly," Zifara replied. "Which means whoever started this either doesn't know him well enough... or knows him too well." Sagiri remained silent throughout the discussion, occasionally lifting a cup of broth to his lips. His lack of participation did not bother the other two. They had long ago learned that his silence usually meant he was listening.

"There is also the timing. How perfect. Those old foxes at the council never stop." Zifara added.

"That bothers me more than the proposal itself. Why now? Why immediately at the festival? They knew he could not refuse, as many people hold marriage to be a blessing?" Koru's chewing slowed.

"You think it was deliberate?" Zifara said. It was not a question

"I think someone wanted to place a daughter under Sagiri's nose, or even worse, a killer." The balcony fell quiet for a moment. Below them, the city continued moving as though nothing was wrong. Merchants closed stalls. Families gathered for meals. Children ran through lantern-lit streets.

Somewhere within the city, someone had made a move. This was a clear move to reduce Sagiri's strength. A marriage could not be put off forever.

The question was whether it had been a political move, a personal one, or something far more dangerous. Azir finally poured more tea into the cups.

"The problem," he said calmly, "is that there are too many people who would benefit from such a marriage." Zifara sighed. "Chiefs. Merchants. Council members. Half the realm would marry their daughters off tomorrow if they thought they had a chance."

Koru snorted. "Half the realm is delusional."

For the first time all evening, a faint sound escaped Sagiri. Not quite a laugh. Not quite a scoff.

Somewhere in between. The other two exchanged glances before returning their attention to the city. Whatever game was being played had already begun. The only question now was who had made the first move and whether they understood exactly whose attention they had just attracted.

The conversation gradually died as the evening deepened and the lantern-lit city below grew brighter. At some point, Sagiri's responses became shorter and farther apart until they stopped altogether.

Zifara noticed it first. The chief was still seated upright in his chair, one arm resting on the armrest and his head tilted slightly to the side. For a moment, it looked as though he was merely listening. Then Koru glanced over and barked out a laugh.

"Finally." He leaned back heavily in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "After a month, he sleeps." There was no mockery in his voice, only relief. Zifara released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

For a month, Sagiri had barely slept. When he did, it was for a few minutes here and there before waking again. The fact that he had fallen asleep in the middle of a conversation was perhaps the strongest proof of how exhausted he truly was and another proof that Azir's remedies had worked magic.

For a few peaceful seconds, the balcony remained quiet.

Suddenly, a distant roar shook the city. The sound rolled across the desert like thunder given life. Every conversation in the streets below died instantly. Every musician stopped playing. Every dancer froze. Even the festival seemed to hold its breath. Another roar followed, louder and closer this time.

Thousands of eyes turned toward the desert beyond the city walls. Something massive was moving. The darkness that had just begun to frown on the horizon to welcome the night after sunset seemed to darken and shift as a colossal shadow emerged from the darkness.

Zaira had returned.

The beast's body stretched across the landscape like a moving mountain. It was moving fast even from a distance, and it only slowed down a bit as it moved across the city, but every step sent tremors through the streets. Buildings that had seemed enormous moments ago now looked insignificant beside it.

The creature moved through the city with calm familiarity, its immense form weaving between districts as citizens rushed to balconies, rooftops, and windows to watch. Children pointed excitedly while elders bowed their heads in respect. No matter how many times they witnessed it, the sight never became ordinary.

The guardian beast crossed the outer city without slowing, its now golden eyes fixed on a single destination. They turned crimson as it crossed in on its target. The tall building where Sagiri sat sleeping. The festival remained suspended as everyone watched. The giant beast eventually reached the structure and lowered its colossal head beside the balcony.

Its eyes settled on Sagiri. For a long moment, it simply stared. Then a deep hum rumbled from its chest. The sound vibrated through the building itself. Perhaps approval for seeing its master not in pain. Zifara smiled faintly while Koru shook his head.

"Possessive beast," he muttered.

As though hearing him, one enormous eye shifted briefly toward Koru before dismissing him entirely. The creature's tail rose from behind its body and swept forward with impossible precision for something so large. The dark appendage wrapped gently around the sleeping supreme chief. Sagiri didn't wake. Not even when the tail lifted him from his chair.

The beast moved with the care one might use to handle a newborn child. Slowly, it placed him atop its massive head between two armored ridges. Sagiri shifted slightly in his sleep but otherwise remained unconscious. Another approving hum escaped the beast. Then, with its burden secured, Zaira turned.

The crowd below erupted into cheers and excited chatter as the mountain-sized creature began moving once more. Streets parted before it. Lanterns flickered in its passing wake.

The festival gradually resumed, though countless eyes remained fixed on the departing guardian. High above the city, Sagiri slept peacefully atop the beast's head while Zaira carried him toward the inner city. The image was so familiar and yet so profound that many citizens would later speak of it for years,

The night their guardian returned from the desert, he found the sleeping chief and carried him home.

The archivist was beside himself with his pen in hand, itching. Recently, he had been very busy.

#### Chapter 355: NEW TRIBE

Two weeks later, Sagiri sat through his fourth council meeting since the festival. The council was so hot to the point of tipping over. Apart from the fifteen main council members of the south. The council had more than a hundred members. Each council member had at least five members on their panel. There were still other council members from different departments.

The novelty of having a new Supreme Chief had finally begun to wear off, replaced by the reality of governing an entire continent. The marriage matter had thankfully not been raised again, though the way Elder Maresha occasionally glanced at him suggested the old man was merely waiting for the right opportunity.

Unfortunately, that was the least of Sagiri's problems. The former Supreme Chief's disappearance had left a mountain of unfinished affairs behind. Trade disputes. Border disagreements. Tribal petitions. Tax reforms. Military appointments. Ancient agreements that required renewal. Matters that had been neglected for years were suddenly appearing before him in stacks high enough to hide a grown man.

Since the festival, he had barely rested. Every time he finished one matter, three more appeared in its place. Even his seclusion had effectively ended despite his condition. The pain remained. Some days were better than others, but it never truly left. He simply learned to function while carrying it.

The council chamber itself had become quieter over the past weeks. The elders had slowly adjusted to

Sagiri's presence. The chiefs argued less. People spoke more carefully. The reality that the young man sitting at the head of the chamber possessed the relics of all five tribes had settled firmly into everyone's minds.

"...which brings us to the western caravan routes," one elder was saying.

Sagiri listened with half an ear while reviewing a report in front of him.

"The merchants request military escorts."

"They can pay for them," Zifara replied immediately. Several chiefs nodded. Several merchants present at the lower council sat looking offended. The argument began. Sagiri rubbed the bridge of his nose. Another one. It seemed every discussion somehow became an argument.

"The request is approved," he said.

The chamber instantly fell silent.

"The merchants will cover half the cost. The South will cover the remainder. The routes benefit everyone." The elder blinked, and the merchants blinked. Zifara looked mildly disappointed that a fight had been avoided.

"Next." Papers shifted. Another matter was brought forward, then another, then another. Hours passed while the men and women of the council tore each other apart. By the time the sun began lowering outside the council chamber windows, even the elders looked exhausted.

Sagiri somehow looked worse. The dark circles beneath his eyes had become permanent companions. His complexion remained pale despite spending time beneath the desert sun. Yet he continued reviewing reports one after another without complaint. Then Elder Maresha slowly rose from his seat.

The old man rarely stood unless he intended to say something important. The chamber quieted. Maresha looked around the room. Then his gaze settled on Sagiri.

"Before we conclude today's session, there is one matter that concerns me." The elder's expression was unusually serious. "For two weeks, we have searched, and there is no trace of the former Supreme Chief that has been found. A former supreme chief knows too much about the south. She cannot be allowed to disappear. What if she sells our secrets?"

That immediately had everyone's attention. The woman had vanished the very day she surrendered her authority. It was as though she had simply walked out of history. Maresha folded his hands behind his back.

"It was clear she was not ready to give away her position, but her disappearance cannot be allowed. She needs to be found before it is too late." Maresha said, and there were several nods.

"What are you scared of. Anyone who attacks the south will die. It doesn't matter what she knows or who she tells. As long as I am alive, I will just kill her and her minions. I should just kill her." Sagiri said silently. The ice in his voice could not be mistaken, and there was silence before there were nods.

"But what if..." Maresha started, but Sagiri cut him off.

"What if I die?" Sagiri basked, and everyone's eyes widened. Elder Maresha threw himself to the ground in fear.

"I dare not curse the chief. You are still young and full of health. I meant to say, what if she has another way?" Maresha asked.

"Whatever way she uses, I will kill her. Or do you think me weak?" Sagiri asked.

"I dare not. You are the keeper and holder of the five relics. " You are strong," Maresha.

"Well then..." Sagiri said. " You may rise. Now on to the last matter. Sagiri glanced down at the final document before him.

"The Tatani cannot continue staying in the North." The statement immediately ignited the chamber. Several council members rose to their feet at once. Objections came from every direction. The move would be expensive.

The Tatani had lived in Tagayia and Safaya for decades. Their lands, homes, and livelihoods were there. Others argued that bringing an entire tribe into Thazir would disrupt the balance of the city. The debate grew louder and louder until it became another shouting match. Sagiri listened for a few moments before finally raising a hand.

The room fell silent.

"I was not asking." The words landed heavily. "The Tatani will be in Thazir before I depart for my clan lands to perform the final rites." Several elders looked unhappy, but none interrupted.

"Since I am their Chief, I declare it." More silence followed. Then one council member cautiously rose.

"Chief, if the Tatani move south, their representation must also be addressed." Sagiri nodded.

"It already has."

The council member frowned. "How?" Sagiri placed the document down.

"The Tatani will receive a seat on this council." The chamber erupted again. This time, even some of the main council members looked shocked. A tribe gaining a permanent council seat was no small matter. Sagiri waited for the noise to settle.

"Their new Kun will occupy it." That silenced the room. "I can no longer serve as their Chief. I am the Supreme Chief of the South. The Tatani require a leader of their own." His crimson eyes swept across the chamber. "They will have one. And they will have a voice in this council." No one argued after that. They had all heard the finality in his tone. The matter was decided.

The Tatani were coming into the city.

"I will personally make sure they are settled," Azir said brightly, and Zifara groaned. The boy could never read a room to save his life

#### Chapter 356: ALMOST TIME

Far from Thazir, inside a dimly lit chamber carved deep beneath the earth, three figures sat around a stone table. The room was illuminated only by a handful of blue flames that cast long shadows across the walls. One of the figures, a woman draped in dark robes, slammed her hand onto the table hard enough to crack the stone beneath it.

"He took everything." Her voice trembled with barely restrained rage. "The council, the tribes, even the people." The memories seemed to make her even angrier.

"They knelt for him even more deeply than they ever did me." The words came out almost like a curse.

"They all knelt! for that bitch's son!!" Neither of the other two interrupted. The woman rose from her seat and began pacing.

"I built that city. I ruled those fools for years, and they abandoned me the moment he appeared." Her eyes burned with hatred. "I should have killed him the moment he arrived."

One of the men finally sighed. The sound was calm, almost bored.

"Then it is fortunate you did not."

The woman rounded on him.

"Fortunate? He humiliated me. He stripped me of everything. He turned the South against me." The man remained completely unmoved.

"And if you had attacked him then, you would be dead."

The woman's jaw tightened.

She hated hearing it because she knew it was true. The second figure finally spoke. Unlike the first man, his voice was deep and rough.

"The reports match your story. The boy is dangerous."

The woman laughed bitterly.

"Dangerous? He commands all five relics. He has the Archive. He rides a monster large enough to swallow houses. He made an entire city kneel in one night or just one hour."

The first man leaned back in his chair.

"And yet here you are."

The woman frowned.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means he did not kill you." That shut her up. The man folded his hands. "Which means he made a mistake." For the first time, a smile appeared on his face, a cold smile.

"The preparations are almost complete." The woman slowly sat down, but her anger and her hatred remained. But curiosity had begun to replace both.

"How much longer?" The man glanced toward the darkness beyond the chamber.

"Not long."

His smile widened.

"The pieces are already in place. Let the boy enjoy his throne. Let him play Chief. Let him waste his strength governing." The woman said, and the woman felt a chill run down her spine with anticipation.

The man looked directly at her.

"So calm yourself, Rika." His eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Revenge is closest when it feels furthest away, my beautiful lady. You have done enough for me so far."

The woman remained silent for several moments, her fingers drumming against the cracked stone table. Eventually, she leaned forward.

"There is one thing that bothers me." The two men looked at her. "He should not be stable." The first man raised an eyebrow. "Explain." She laughed bitterly. "I watched him. I watched him force the five relics into submission. I watched him claim the Archive. I watched him stand before the South and act as though nothing had happened. That is impossible." Neither man interrupted. "No one was meant to hold all five relics. No one." Her voice hardened. "Even the records suggest the burden would destroy the bearer. Yet somehow he is still alive." The rough-voiced man leaned back. "Alive does not mean healthy." The chamber became quiet.

The first man slowly nodded. "I have been thinking the same thing." He reached into his robes and placed a bundle of reports upon the table. "Our eyes within Thazir have been busy." The woman immediately grabbed them. Her eyes moved rapidly across the pages. Then a smile appeared. Small at first. Then larger. "He secluded himself." "For nearly a month," the man replied. "Immediately after claiming the relics." The woman's smile widened further. "And?" "He has barely been seen outside official functions." "And?" "Several servants reported hearing disturbances from within the fortress." Her eyes lit up. "Go on." "Broken furniture. Screaming. Days without visitors." The woman sat back in satisfaction. "I knew it."

The rough-voiced man folded his arms. "The relics are killing him." The woman nodded immediately. "Of course they are." "No," the first man said. "Not killing him." Both looked at him. "Breaking him." The distinction seemed important. He tapped the reports. "If he were dying, he would be easier to predict. This is worse. He is surviving." Nobody liked that answer. The woman frowned. "Then what are you suggesting?" The man sighed. "I am suggesting that every day he survives is a disaster for us." The room became still. "The boy we face today is weak." His finger tapped the table. "Weak enough to suffer."

Another tap. "Weak enough to bleed." Another tap. "Weak enough to break." His gaze lifted. "But what happens if he masters the relics?" Nobody answered.

The rough-voiced man was the first to break the silence. "Then we lose." Simple. Direct. Honest. The woman hated hearing it, but she could not deny it. She had seen Sagiri's dance above Thazir. She had seen the thousand blades suspended over an entire city. That had been while he was barely controlling his power. The thought of him mastering it was enough to make her uncomfortable. "Then we kill him first," she said. The rough-voiced man nodded. "Obviously." "No," the first man replied. "Not obviously." Both frowned. "Do not underestimate him simply because he is suffering. A wounded beast is still a beast." He leaned forward. "And that one commands five relics, an Archive, and a monster the size of a fortress." The woman clenched her fists. "Then what do you suggest?" The man's smile returned. Slow. Patient. Dangerous. "We do not attack him when he is strongest." "We attack him when he is weakest." The woman stared. "And when will that be?" The man's eyes gleamed in the blue firelight. "Soon." He tapped the reports again. "Very soon." Then his smile widened. "Because a man carrying that much power can only hide his weakness for so long before the world notices."

#### Chapter 357: INTO N'FOLU

Sagiri crossed the ancient boundary marker and entered the lands of the N'folu alone. It was now the end of the second month since he assumed his position as supreme chief. The pain in his body had become bearable, and he could at least function. He could wait a little longer, even so. He had grown restless over the past week. He could feel something brewing, and he knew it could soon be time.

He had asked that no one accompany him for this, even though the council argued that it would be shameful for him to go alone, and they would accompany him. Even so, he did not want anyone to accompany him. This was one of those things one has to do alone. He had dreaded the journey, and even though he could make it from Thazir in less than a day on Zaira, he had slowed down, and they had taken a full day.

He could feel the crippling sense of familiarity the closer he got, and he dreaded it more and more. Finally, however, he was in Nkara, the loins of the south, and in Nfolu.

He now stood on Zaira's head at the edge of the lands.

Before him stretched a vast wasteland so large that the horizon seemed unable to contain it. Once, this had been a thriving homeland filled with villages, markets, laughter, and the countless lives of his people. Now it was nothing but ruins. Burned foundations emerged from the desert like black scars.

Entire streets lay buried beneath drifting sand and debris, their outlines barely visible beneath years of abandonment.

The remains of homes stood as charred skeletons, roofless walls reaching toward the sky like the fingers of the dead. Great halls where chiefs once gathered had been reduced to heaps of cracked stone and ash. Everywhere he looked, there were signs that the destruction had not been accidental but deliberate. Even the archive memory of what I once was looked so distant from what his eyes could see now.

Whoever had come here had wanted the N'folu erased from history. The fire had been so fierce that some stones were still blackened despite the passing years. The wind moved through the ruins with a hollow whistle, stirring ash and sand across what had once been roads. No birds sang. No animals wandered the land.

Even the desert seemed reluctant to claim the place fully. The devastation continued farther than the eye could see, spreading across leagues upon leagues of barren ground until it felt less like the ruins of a settlement and more like the grave of an entire people.

Sagiri walked among the shattered remains in silence, past broken walls, collapsed courtyards, and halfburied remnants of lives interrupted, while the empty homeland stretched endlessly around him, a monument to loss beneath the merciless desert sun.

Zaira moved deeper into the ruins of the N'folu homeland behind sagiri, and with every step, the boundary between the present and the Archive grew thinner. At first, it was only flickers at the edge of his vision. A shadow crossing a ruined street. A figure standing where no figure should have been. Then the images became clearer. The empty roads around him were once filled with people.

Mothers hurried past carrying baskets, children racing through courtyards that no longer existed. Merchants called out from stalls that were now nothing but piles of blackened stone. For a moment, the city lived again. Sagiri stopped walking. His chest tightened. The laughter was real. The voices were real.

He could almost believe he had arrived before the destruction. Then the image shifted.

A child running through the street vanished as a flaming arrow pierced his back. The market erupted into screams. The merchants disappeared beneath a wave of armored warriors. Blood splashed across walls that in the present existed only as ruins.

Sagiri staggered forward, but the vision did not stop. Everywhere he looked, two worlds occupied the same space. The dead city and the living city. The past and the present. One moment, he saw a thriving home. The next time he saw the same building collapse beneath fire. Every ruined foundation he passed revealed another memory.

Every shattered wall showed him the life that had once existed there before showing him how it ended. The Archive gave him no mercy. A courtyard became an execution ground. A family home became a tomb. A meeting hall became a pyre. The screams followed him everywhere. They echoed from empty buildings and drifted across barren streets.

He could hear the clash of steel, the roar of flames, and the cries of his people as clearly as if the slaughter were happening around him now. Then he reached the center of the settlement and froze. The thirteen formations were there. Not physically, but the image was so vivid that he could see every warrior standing in position.

Men and women bearing the same markings as his own stood bloodied, exhausted, and broken.

Behind them gathered the survivors, children, elders, and mothers clutching infants. People with nowhere left to run. Sagiri's breathing became ragged. He knew this place. This was where they had made their final stand. He could feel it. Their fear, their despair, and their acceptance.

The overwhelming certainty that death was coming. Then the Archive forced another memory into him. Warriors in black combat suits with copper markings advancing through the flames.

Tagayia warriors.

The sight struck him harder than any blade. His legs nearly gave out beneath him. Around him, the illusion and reality merged completely. The burning city stood atop the ruins. The dead walked alongside the living. The screams of the past echoed through the silence of the present. And as Sagiri continued walking through the graveyard of his people, every step revealed another memory waiting beneath the sand.

The further Sagiri walked, the more the Archive tore him apart. The ruins disappeared beneath living memories until he could no longer tell whether he was walking through the present or the past.

A roar of agony ripped from his throat and echoed across the empty homeland. He fell to his knees, fingers digging into the sand as tears streamed uncontrollably down his face. The memories became sharper, crueler.

He saw mothers struck down while shielding their children. The Warriors were collapsing one after another as the thirteen formations failed. Homes burned, families slaughtered, and entire bloodlines erased in moments. Every scream entered him. Every death became his own.

He begged for it to stop, but the Archive only dragged him deeper. Staggering forward, half-blind with grief, he crossed streets that no longer existed and passed buildings that rebuilt themselves before collapsing again in fire. Then he reached the heart of the settlement. The place where the Archive had once stood. Even in ruin, it dominated the landscape.

Broken pillars rose from the desert like the bones of a dead giant, while shattered foundations stretched farther than the eye could see. Yet the moment he stepped into its shadow, the vision became complete. The ruins vanished. Before him stood the Archive in all its former glory. Towering structures climbed into the heavens. Bridges connected impossible heights. Thousands of N'folu filled the grounds below. For one heartbreaking moment, he saw what his people had been before the slaughter.

Then the sky turned black with smoke. The magnificent structure began to die. People ran in terror as sections of the Archive collapsed into the streets. Sagiri dropped to one knee, clutching his chest as though his heart were being torn from him. The grief of an entire people crashed into him at once. He could barely breathe.

Sagiri never moved from the ruins. He lay upon the cold earth of his homeland while the Archive poured memory after memory into him without mercy. The entire night passed that way. Sometimes he witnessed horrors so terrible that he felt his soul being torn apart alongside the screams of his people.

Other times, he was shown simple moments of happiness that hurt even more: children racing through streets that no longer existed, families sharing meals, young warriors boasting of future victories, elders laughing beneath shaded courtyards, mothers singing to infants who would never grow old.

He wept openly as the good memories mixed with the bad, as life and death became impossible to separate.

As the hours passed, grief slowly gave way to something colder.

By the time dawn finally rose over the shattered homeland, Sagiri sat alone among the ruins with red eyes and a face hollowed by sorrow. The pain of the relics still burned through him, and the grief remained, but something had changed. For months, he had convinced himself there was time to heal, time to recover, time to prepare.

Standing amidst the grave of an entire people, he finally understood how wrong he had been. His enemies had already stolen generations from the N'folu. They had already taken everything worth taking. As the first sunlight touched the broken remains of the Archive, Sagiri slowly rose to his feet and looked across the homeland one final time.

His revenge could not wait any longer.

#### Chapter 358: URGENT MEETING.

The summons had reached every corner of Thazir before dawn, dragging chiefs from their estates and elders from their beds with a single command from the War General.

Attend immediately.

By the time the council chamber filled, an uneasy tension had already settled over the room. Conversations were short and whispered. No one seemed willing to speak too loudly, as if doing so might invite bad news into existence. The empty seat of the Supreme Chief loomed over the chamber, a constant reminder that Sagiri was absent.

Several council members kept glancing toward it unconsciously. When the great doors finally opened, silence swept through the room instantly. Zifara entered wearing full war armor rather than his ceremonial attire, every step echoing against the stone floor.

The sight alone tightened stomachs.

A Kai only calls for urgent meetings when there is a threat of war.

Behind him followed senior officers of the Southern Army, their expressions grim and unreadable. The atmosphere grew so heavy that breathing felt difficult. Elder Maresha's fingers stopped tapping. Chiefs who normally argued over every matter sat perfectly still.

Even the wandering members seemed uneasy.

Zifara climbed the steps to the head of the chamber and stopped beside Sagiri's empty seat. For a long moment, he said nothing, allowing the silence to stretch until it became unbearable. His gaze swept across every face in the room, and whatever they saw in his eyes caused several elders to straighten in alarm.

Something was wrong. Very wrong. The realization spread through the chamber like a sickness before a single word had even been spoken. Zifara allowed the silence to linger for several moments before speaking.

"I called all of you here in a hurry because the Supreme Chief has not returned." The statement struck the chamber like a hammer. Confused murmurs immediately spread through the council. Zifara's expression remained grim.

"He is not a child. He can come back when he wants to. Besides, it's not like he has not been doing well since his arrival. No one dares seal my goods at sea anymore, even the islanders of Yokova state." The Prince of Tides said.

"You only care about your stomach. Typical greed." The iron matron shook her head.

"The final rites were expected to take four days. It has now been eleven." Koru said. He was standing beside Zifara. He had requested to go with Sagiri to do the final rites, but Sagiri had waned to do this alone. The murmurs became voices.

"Contact?" one elder asked.

"None," Zifara replied.

"Sightings?" The veiled speaker asked. This further proved that not even his masters of whispers knew what had happened. Of course, they could not dare follow Sagiri around. Not even they were that daring.

"None," Zifara said in a hard voice.

"Zaira?" Elder Maresha. "Surely that beast is too big to just disappear into thin air."

"Gone as well. My men have searched every nook and cranny of the south." That was what truly unsettled the room. The beast had vanished alongside its master. The chamber erupted instantly. The Chiefs rose from their seats. Elders began talking over one another. Some argued there was nothing to worry about. Sagiri possessed powers beyond their understanding.

Perhaps he had entered a deep meditation. Others pointed out that he had disappeared before without warning.

The Tatani chief seat remained empty this round. She might have been given a seat by Sagiri, but even Seya knew she had to earn it, and coming to meetings on her second or third week in the city could only make her life and her people's difficult. Council affairs continued without a Tatani representative for now.

"There is every reason for alarm." His voice cut through the noise. "I know the Chief." Several members looked unconvinced.

"Do you?" one elder challenged.

"The boy barely tells anyone what he is thinking." Laughter followed. Calling a boy was laughable. Sagiri was not a boy or a child. Zifara ignored it.

"Something is wrong." His eyes hardened. "I felt it the day he left." That caused the room to quiet slightly.

"Felt what?" Elder Maresha asked. Zifara hesitated.

"Obsession." The word hung in the air.

"The Chief went to perform rites." The archivist said. "I am only sad I did not get to witness him perform the rites so I can record every detail."

"And?" The Mazuku chief said to Zifara, ignoring the archivist. Even after his brother died, he still pretended to care about the supreme chief, but everyone knew it was because he could not do anything and he just chose to bite his loss.

"And I believe he found something." More silence followed. Then another elder scoffed.

"You think the Supreme Chief wandered into the desert and lost his mind?" Several council members nodded. Zifara didn't back down.

"I think he went to bury the dead and found a reason to avenge them instead." The chamber exploded again. Half the council immediately rejected the notion. The other half looked troubled.

"Impossible." The hawk-eye judge said. "The Chief is disciplined. He would never abandon the South. He knows his responsibilities."

"He is not some reckless child." The beast warden said. Beast doesn't listen to reckless people.

"The N'folu massacre happened years ago." The arguments crashed into one another from every direction. Zifara slammed a hand onto the table. The sound echoed through the chamber.

"You didn't see him." Silence followed. "You didn't see the look in his eyes before he returned to Nkara."

His gaze swept across the room. "The Chief has carried too much pain for too long. The relics. The Archive. His tribe. His parents. The betrayal." His voice lowered. "And now he has disappeared into the place where all of it began." Even those who disagreed fell silent. Elder Maresha slowly rose from his seat. His expression was troubled. "Then what exactly are you suggesting, General?" Zifara looked toward Sagiri's empty chair.

"I am suggesting that the most powerful man in the South has vanished." The room became deathly quiet. "And I fear he may have decided that revenge is more important than ruling."

The chamber fell silent for a heartbeat before one of the older chiefs frowned.

"And what exactly is the problem?" Several heads turned toward him. The chief spread his hands. "If the Supreme Chief has discovered the truth behind the destruction of his people and intends to seek justice, why should that concern us?" A murmur of agreement swept through portions of the council. Another chief rose.

"The Nfolu were part of the South. Their blood is our blood. If they were betrayed, then the South was betrayed." More voices joined in.

"Exactly." The Tavhiri chief was the loudest

"The Supreme Chief has every right. More than a right. An obligation to avenge his ancestors and clan." The Azuvai chief added.

Zifara remained standing, his expression unchanged.

"You are missing the point."

"No, General," Elder Maresha interrupted quietly. "Perhaps you are." The old man slowly rose to his feet. The chamber immediately quieted. "The issue is not whether Sagiri seeks revenge." His eyes swept across the gathered chiefs and elders. "The issue is whether we stand beside him when he does." Silence followed.

Nobody liked that question. It was easy to support revenge from the safety of a council chamber. Much harder when armies began marching. One of the merchant elders cleared his throat.

"Perhaps we should first determine who the enemy is." Several people nodded eagerly.

Another added, "And whether war is necessary." That sparked immediate outrage from some of the chiefs.

"Necessary?" one barked. "If someone slaughtered an entire tribe, what more necessity do you need?" The argument erupted again. Voices rose. Accusations followed. Some urged caution. Others demanded action.

Then Elder Maresha slammed his staff against the floor. The crack echoed through the chamber.

"Enough." The room fell silent. The old man's gaze hardened. "The South knelt before Sagiri. That included every tribe, every city, and every council member." His eyes moved from face to face. "We accepted him as Supreme Chief because we believed he would protect us. Now the question before us is whether we will protect him or cower like fools again.

"If our Chief marches to war alone while we sit safely behind these walls, then we are cowards." The word stung. Several chiefs looked away. "If he uncovers the truth and we hide because we fear the consequences, then we never deserved to call him Supreme Chief." The chamber remained deathly still.

"The General is right to worry," Maresha continued. "Not because Sagiri seeks revenge. Any son would seek revenge. Any Chief would seek revenge." His gaze settled on Sagiri's empty seat. "The danger is that he may believe he must carry it alone." For the first time since the meeting began, nobody argued.

They simply stared at the empty chair where their Supreme Chief should have been, and wondered whether, at that very moment, he was preparing for a war that could set the entire continent ablaze.

"So then you called us here to prepare for a possible war." The veiled speaker said, finally.

"We are already at war, I believe. The boy was sent away by the north. Yet they still hold his parents." Zifara said.

"If the North took our silence sixteen years ago for weakness, then they are wrong. They kill the man's tribe and now taunt him. Perhaps they should feel the wrath of the South." Koru snarled.

## Chapter 359: INSANITY

Zaira roared. The sound was enough to shake the ground and enough to stop the thousands of arrows that were being launched at them.

Its master had gone crazy with pain, and the beast had gone mad with him, perhaps or perhaps I could feel his pain. Anyway, that was hours ago, and now it was dawn, and her master was headed to the heart of Tagayia. By now, all the warriors situated at the southern border of Tagayia lay dead.

Sagiri had gone mad. He only asked them to back down once before he flattened the whole garrison. By first light, the whole Tagayia would be aware of what had happened. And yet he was not stopping. He was going to the very heart of Tagayia.

Now, at the very crack of dawn, Sagiri stood before the great garrison protecting Alike City, the morning sun creeping over the horizon behind him. Thousands of soldiers lined the walls, yet an unnatural silence hung over the battlefield as every eye fixed upon the approaching figure.

Sagiri no longer looked like the young man. His face had become gaunt and pale, his cheeks hollow, dark circles resting beneath eyes that burned crimson like open wounds. Her hair had gone completely red with only a few strands of black in it now. His clothes hung loosely from a body that looked as though it should have collapsed long ago, and yet the terrible intensity in his gaze made him more frightening than ever.

He looked less like a ruler and more like a crazy man who had abandoned everything except a single purpose...

To kill.

Beneath him, Zaira seemed to share in his suffering. The beast's immense body radiated a suffocating darkness, black mist leaking from between its scales and drifting across the ground like smoke. Its golden eyes had become wild and bloodshot.

The pain consuming Sagiri had somehow become fuel for the creature, feeding its fury until it appeared larger, darker, and more monstrous than ever before. Together, they looked like a nightmare given form, master and beast bound by grief, rage, and purpose.

As the first rays of sunlight illuminated the walls of Alike, the soldiers watching from above felt a chill run through them, before they saw a beast standing in front of the gates of the garrison. Zaira rose until he was standing eye to eye with them, high above the garrison and even higher, so he was looking down at them. The last defence of the city was a war fortress in itself.

For several long seconds, neither side moved. Then Zaira lifted its massive head toward the brightening sky. The beast's chest expanded. Darkness seemed to gather around its body as if the shadows themselves were being pulled inward.

Then the beast roared.

The sound exploded across the plains like the wrath of a god. The earth shook violently beneath its feet. Stones cracked. Dust erupted from the ground. Men on the walls lost their footing and crashed to the battlements. Several watchtowers groaned under the force of the sound alone. The roar rolled onward across the countryside, racing through valleys and over hills until it reached Alika itself.

Citizens were jolted awake from their beds. Children cried. Birds exploded from rooftops in panicked flocks. For one terrible moment, the entire city seemed to freeze beneath the weight of that sound. Then the first war horn sounded. A deep blast tore through the morning air. Another answered it. Then another. Then dozens more joined in until the entire garrison was screaming warnings across the battlefield.

Archers immediately flooded the battlements. Defensive arrays flickered to life across the walls as the signal for war spread through Alika faster than wildfire. Yet through all the chaos, Sagiri remained motionless atop Zaira's head. His crimson eyes stared at the city beyond the walls. Unblinking.

Unwavering. Waiting. As though the roar had not been a threat. As though it had merely been a warning that vengeance had arrived.

For days after leaving the N'folu homeland, Sagiri had remained trapped between two battles. Only rage within him. Every instinct screamed at him to move. To march. To hunt. To make someone answer for the blood that stained his memories. Yet he forced himself to remain still.

The Archive had shown him enough to know that acting blindly would only satisfy his anger, not his vengeance.

Then, three days ago, early in the morning, like a good coincidence, when he could not take it anymore, the message arrived. A black-feathered desert hawk descended from the sky and landed upon a broken pillar overlooking the ruins. Sagiri immediately recognized the markings tied around its leg.

His eyes narrowed. The bird had come from the North. More specifically, from one of the few people he had trusted enough to place within Tagayia itself. The hawk remained motionless as Sagiri untied the small message tube.

He opened it. Read the contents once. One of the pieces he had been searching for had finally been found. Then he slowly folded the message and closed his hand around it. The paper turned to dust. Behind him, Zaira stirred. The beast had been resting among the ruins, but the moment it sensed the change in its master, it rose to its feet. Its massive head turned toward him.

"I think it is finally time to send a warning," he said quietly, a sadistic smile taking over his face. The first part of his plan could now be set in motion. And oh, what perfect timing.

Zaira lowered itself. Sagiri climbed onto the beast's head without another word. Then the monster turned north.

It was now a week shy of the three months he had expected, but his pain had been waiting for this moment. He had finally begun to master the relics, and the pain had lowered to a constant pulsing one. It was unbearable, and Koru insisted he wait six months, but they both had a role to play. He trusted Koru to do his part fully. He had made alliances in the south, too. Though still unstable, having them nevertheless was the only necessity.

The archers knew better than to fire, but they still held the line. They were, of course, the most seasoned of Tagayia protecting the city that guarded the Supreme mandra himself.

"Aren't you going to fire and give me an excuse to kill you?" Sagiri asked.

The man clearly in charge stepped forward. It was clear he was an Askana by mere size.

"What do you want, Southerner?"

"I see you know me," Sagiri said.

"We have all heard of the new supreme chief and Mfalu of the south." The man said.

"I see my reputation precedes me. You should know then that I am not a patient man. I made a deal with your shadow general. I took out his trash, but he has yet to honour his end. Tell Tsaka that he has three hours to bring my parents here, or your families will be holding a funeral for you by sundown.

## Chapter 360: REUNION

An hour passed with neither side making a move. The warriors remained on the walls with weapons drawn while Zaira stood before the garrison like a mountain of darkness. Then a lone hawk appeared in the distance and flew directly toward the beast.

Hundreds of eyes followed it until it landed upon one of Zaira's head and on sagiri's hand. Sagiri calmly untied the small message tube and unfolded the letter. His crimson eyes moved across the contents before a cold laugh escaped him.

The message was from Tsaka.

An honor to receive the Supreme Chief of the South. You once said you would keep your visit silent should you ever come to Tagayia. It seems we have both broken our words. I will return your parents to you as promised, but save an old man a little face and come to me in the Inner City first so we may share a cup of tea.

No wonder the white-haired beast, Art Mandra, kept him close. The man is as cunning as he is smart.

Sagiri lowered the letter and stared toward the distant city beyond the walls. Then he scoffed.

"Cunning fox." The paper crumpled inside his hand. Of course, Tsaka would answer this way. The old man was buying time, testing intentions, trying to maintain control of the board without moving a single piece. Exactly what Sagiri expected from him. A humorless smile crossed his face.

"If you are planning something," he said quietly, "I will kill you." The words were so calm that several soldiers on the walls felt a chill crawl down their spines.

Beneath him, Zaira released a low growl and began turning without needing another command. Its massive body shifted, casting an even larger shadow over the garrison as it faced deeper into Tagayia. The soldiers watched in disbelief.

Sagiri tucked the letter away and settled himself atop the beast's head. "Alika City." The command was barely a whisper. Zaira immediately began moving. The earth trembled beneath every step as the colossal beast left the garrison behind and headed toward Alika.

Sagiri arrived at the Inner City in a manner that ensured nobody would ever forget it. The gates, massive enough to allow entire military formations through, stood open as though welcoming a king.

Waiting before them was Tsaka himself. The Shadow General stood atop the gatehouse wall, his cloak dancing in the morning wind while soldiers lined the battlements behind him in complete silence. The moment Zaira approached, the old man brought a fist to his chest and offered a formal salute.

"So your ride is real," Tsaka said loudly enough for those nearby to hear. His eyes traveled over the colossal beast. "I must admit, I was not expecting such a large horse."

Sagiri stared down at him without amusement. He could hear the old man's heartbeat from where he sat. Fast. Controlled. But fast nonetheless. Tsaka was afraid. Everyone with sense was afraid.

"He is hungry," Sagiri replied coldly. "After you kept me waiting." Several soldiers visibly stiffened. Tsaka merely smiled.

"Then I apologize for offending you." The man's tongue dripped with honey as he said that, and Sagiri narrowed his eyes.

"Do you have a trap prepared?" Sagiri folded his hands to his chest and cocked his head. A ripple passed through the gathered warriors. Tsaka laughed softly.

"I am not that stupid." The old fox spread his hands. "I only wish to welcome the new Chief of the South." Such a flattering old fox. Before Sagiri could respond, Tsaka stepped off the gatehouse. The drop was high enough to kill an ordinary man several times over. Yet the old general fell with complete confidence, twisting once before landing lightly upon the ground as though gravity itself had agreed to spare him.

So the fox is not only strong, but his secret art is deadly, and to master it to such a level.

For the first time, Sagiri found himself mildly surprised.

The old man was far stronger than he appeared.

Then Tsaka stuck two fingers under his tongue and whistled sharply. A black warhorse came galloping from within the city. He mounted it in one smooth motion before turning back toward the gates.

"Welcome to Tagayia, Mfalu of the South." Then he wheeled his horse around and began riding toward the heart of the Inner City. Behind him, Zaira simply stepped over the gatehouse wall. Stone cracked beneath its claws as the colossal beast entered the city like a moving mountain.

The moment Zaira entered Aliká's Outer City, chaos erupted. The same chaos that ensured Thazir when they saw Zaira's massive form. People screamed and fled from the streets as the colossal beast passed through the wide streets overhead, its shadow swallowing entire buildings.

Yet through all the terror, Tsaka continued riding calmly toward the Inner City as though escorting a guest rather than a force capable of destroying the city. Eventually, they reached the second gate. Unlike the first, an escort was already waiting there.

Sagiri barely noticed them. His eyes had locked onto two familiar figures standing beside the gate. For a moment, everything else disappeared. The city, the soldiers, the pain, and even the revenge. The next instant, he vanished from Zaira's head. Even Tsaka's eyes widened slightly. One moment, Sagiri was atop the beast, and the next, he was standing before them.

He landed in front of his parents, startling them a little.

Rusha stared at him. Her son had become taller than his father. His face had hardened. Scars marked his skin. His crimson hair hung around a face worn far beyond his years. For several seconds, she simply looked at him as though trying to reconcile the little boy she remembered with the man standing before her. Then her eyes filled with tears.

"Sagiri..." she whispered. Her voice broke. "My baby... you've grown so big." She reached toward his face with trembling fingers.

"I missed you." That was all it took. The distance vanished. Rusha threw herself into him and wrapped her arms around him so tightly that it almost hurt. Sagiri froze. For months, he had carried pain, rage, grief, betrayal, and responsibility. Even endured agony that should have broken him.

Yet none of it prepared him for his mother's embrace. Her warmth surrounded him. He had almost forgotten it. His eyes widened slightly as something inside him cracked. The endless tension gripping his body loosened. His breathing slowed. The murderous storm raging within him quieted.

Behind them, Zaira lowered its head and released a low rumble. The beast's bloodshot eyes gradually returned to their normal golden color as if feeling the same peace flowing through its master. Sagiri slowly raised his arms and held his mother back. For the first time in days, the madness left his eyes; he simply stood there as a son in his mother's arms while she cried into his shoulder.

"Father, you did not miss your son," Sagiri said, and that was Bakuru's last straw, and he joined in the hug. The embrace lasted an eternity before the two parents pulled back, but remained close.

"Have you been eating? You look unwell." Rusha's voice cracked. "That wicked man on the horse kept me from coming to see you, and now he says you become the supreme chief. I missed your coronation," She wept. Sagiri turned to look at Tsaka, and he flinched dramatically. It could seem that his parents had not suffered, and in fact, they looked well, even better than he had left them.

"You can continue talking in my fortress. Please follow me." Tsaka cut in his hand, outstretched to the city.

Just seeing his parents, Sagiri's heart tightened. He had been acting strong even with a truth only he knew, but seeing Rusha cry made him feel guilty about what he was about to do. Perhaps having tea with them was not a bad idea.

You are a cunning man, Tsaka.