

KEEPER 361

Chapter 361: ANOTHER FAREWELL

Later that evening, after sharing a meal with his parents for the first time in years and talking about nothing in particular all day, and about how their lives had been, he watched them prepare for the journey south.

Even so, he had matters to iron out with Tsaka, which is why he now stood atop one of the highest rooftops in Alika beside Tsaka.

The city stretched beneath them, its lights beginning to awaken as dusk settled across the North. The day had gone by quickly; he hadn't even noticed it. For a while, neither spoke.

Then Sagiri broke the silence.

"I know you did not welcome me to the city just to give me tea," Sagiri said.

"Perhaps I have missed seeing your face. You were a little nicer when you were here last time." Tsaka said.

"Cut to the chase, or I will have my beauty eat you," Sagiri said, and the man finally got serious.

"Are you going south with your parents. You have settled the scale with me. Now we are even." Tsaka said on a serious note.

"Balancing scales, you say? I have not even begun equalizing the scales, shadow general of the north, and I won't be leaving the North for a while." Sagiri said.

Tsaka's expression remained unchanged, though his eyes sharpened slightly.

"That is not possible." The older man said, shaking his head and resting his hand on the hilt of his blade out of habit. Sagiri looked toward the horizon.

"There is a bigger scale that needs equalizing." Sagiri ignored the man's whining. The words were calm, but there was enough killing intent buried beneath them to make the air feel colder. Tsaka sighed heavily.

"You are the Supreme Chief of the South now. Entire cities wait for your return. Armies answer to you. You cannot simply wander through the North starting wars." Tsaka argued. The man was either cunning, selfish, for only caring to save his skin, or a coward.

Sagiri finally turned toward him.

"Try and stop me then, general of shadows." For a heartbeat, the rooftop fell silent. Then Tsaka laughed.

"I dare not." The old fox shook his head.

"For all I know, by tomorrow morning, you have already escorted your parents safely back to the South." His smile widened slightly. "In fact, I am quite certain that is exactly what happened. The Supreme Chief of the South arrived, collected his parents, shared a meal, and departed peacefully. As for whether a certain red-haired madman remains somewhere in the North..." Tsaka spread his hands innocently.

"...I would know nothing about that."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Sagiri's mouth for the first time in days. The old man was turning a blind eye. A way for him to move without forcing Tagayia into openly choosing sides.

Clever.

Very clever.

Tsaka's expression slowly became serious again.

"Just remember one thing, Sagiri. Revenge is a debt that never stops growing. Be careful that by the time you finish collecting it, there is still enough of you left to return home." Tsaka said, and for a moment, neither spoke.

Then Sagiri looked northward into the darkening distance.

"That depends on whether the people who owe me decide to make this easy. Besides, I have nothing to return to. They killed my whole tribe. Your mandra will answer to me when I am done with them. His inability to rule caused this," Sagiri snarled.

Even Tsaka had no answer to that.

"That will be war. You know that. The mandra does not decide on all matters of war. He had just become mandra back then."

"So he is incompetent. Don't tell me the North is scared of a war either. You know that is far from the truth. I have the orphans you created in my turf now." Sagiri said his voice bleeding with sarcasm.

"You are not in the north, as far as I know. I will talk to the mandra." Tsaka after another pause

"Don't mind, I will talk to that beast art freak myself," Sagiri said before he stepped onto the edge of the rooftop and looked down at the colossal beast waiting below. The wind pulled at his crimson hair as he glanced back at Tsaka one final time.

"See you soon, General." His voice was calm, but something was chilling beneath it. "An apology won't do. The North owes the South a debt..." His crimson eyes narrowed slightly.

"...Owes me a debt."

Before Tsaka could answer, Sagiri stepped forward and vanished from the rooftop. A heartbeat later, he landed atop Zaira's head as lightly as a falling feather. The beast immediately sensed the change in its master's mood and released a low snarl that rolled through the streets like distant thunder.

Zaira slowly lowered its massive head all the way to the ground. The movement alone shook nearby buildings. Waiting beside the beast, Rusha and her husband exchanged uncertain glances before carefully climbing onto the broad scales.

Even after all these years, it was difficult to believe their son commanded such a creature.

Once they were secure, Zaira began rising.

Higher and higher it lifted its head until it towered above the walls of the Inner City itself. The beast paused there for a moment, looking across Alika. Then it roared. The sound exploded through the city like a judgment. Towers trembled. Windows shattered. Birds erupted into the sky in terrified flocks. Citizens stumbled as the foundations beneath their feet vibrated.

Then, without another glance behind him, Sagiri turned his gaze toward the horizon. Zaira pivoted, its massive body moving like a living mountain through the streets, before it finally left Alika behind and began carrying its master and his parents south.

Zaira had carried them deep into the east and south, where no curious eyes could follow. The beast stood upon a rocky rise overlooking endless plains while the wind swept through the tall grass below. Sagiri stood before his parents in silence for several moments.

The time had come. Zaira would carry them south. He would remain behind. Rusha already knew it. He could see it in her eyes. She had been avoiding the conversation ever since they left the city.

"No," she said before he could even speak.

"No..." Her voice cracked. "...You are coming with us." She begged, and Sagiri looked away.

"I can't." He said in a tight voice.

"You can." She stepped forward immediately. "Whatever this is, whatever you think you need to do, you don't have to"

Sagiri shook his head.

"It has already waited too long." His father remained silent, understanding far more than he wished to. Rusha grabbed her son's arm. Tears were already forming in her eyes.

"You just found us. We just found you. You expect me to return south while you stay behind in a land that clearly wants you dead?" For a moment, Sagiri almost broke.

"Mom." His voice softened. "I have to finish this." She shook her head repeatedly.

"No. No, you don't." Then she threw her arms around him. This time, there was no joy in the embrace. Only fear. Fear of losing him again. Sagiri closed his eyes and hugged her back. For several long moments, neither moved.

"I promise I'll come back," he said quietly. Rusha laughed bitterly through her tears.

"If you don't, I will not forgive you. A child can't die before their parent. You are my only child. You know this, my son." Rusha cried. Even Sagiri couldn't argue with that. Eventually, his father stepped forward and gently placed a hand on Rusha's shoulder.

"Let him go." She turned toward him in disbelief.

"How can you say that?"

"Because look at him." The older man sighed. "

"Take care of yourself," Sagiri said, looking into his father's eyes. "Mother, I will always be your son. Forgive me for not listening to you this time. I will surely come back to you.

"Take care of yourself," she whispered. Zaira lowered its massive head. The beast seemed unusually quiet, almost understanding the moment. Rusha reluctantly climbed aboard while Sagiri's father followed. Before stepping away, Sagiri placed a hand against one of Zaira's scales.

"Take them home. Then come back. Tell Koru to proceed with the plan." The beast rumbled softly in response. For a brief moment, its massive golden eye met his. Then Zaira turned away. Rusha looked back the entire time as the beast began moving. She continued waving until the distance swallowed them from sight.

Sagiri stood alone atop the hill long after they disappeared beyond the horizon. Only when they were completely gone did he finally turn north.

The warmth he had been holding onto vanished with them.

Chapter 362: PIECES MOVING

The atmosphere inside the hidden chamber had completely changed. Gone was the confidence they had carried only days ago. Panic had taken its place. The woman paced back and forth while the two men stood over a table covered in maps and reports.

"He wasn't supposed to move yet," she snapped. "He was supposed to spend months recovering." One of the men looked equally unsettled.

"That was the prediction." He said silently, but he did not sound alarmed at all

"Your prediction was wrong," she hissed. The older man, clearly the one in charge, slammed a hand onto the table hard enough to silence them both.

"Enough. Panicking won't solve anything." His eyes settled on the younger man. "Tell me the truth. Is the project ready?" The younger man's face paled.

"No, my Lord," He said, bowing deeply. Silence followed.

"How long?" the leader asked.

"At least two weeks." The room became deathly still. Then the older man's expression darkened.

"You don't have two weeks."

"I need them. It is necessary so that no mistakes are made"

"No." The answer came immediately. "You have three days." The younger man stared at him in disbelief.

"Three days? That's impossible... my lord." He corrected himself and his tone when he got an icy glare from his master

"Then do the impossible." The older man's voice had become ice. "Because if the leech reaches us before it is complete, none of us will live long enough to worry about deadlines." They had all heard the reports. Entire garrisons erased. Cities are placed on alert. The Supreme Chief of the South is moving north like a force of nature. The woman suddenly stopped pacing. Her breathing had become uneven.

"He's coming." Neither man answered. "He's coming for us." Her voice was little more than a whisper now. Then her hand disappeared into her garments. Both men looked up as she withdrew a small object wrapped in dark cloth. Even the leader's expression changed when he saw it.

"You kept that?" he asked quietly. The woman stared at the bundle with burning eyes. Hatred twisted her features. Years of bitterness. Years of fear. Years of resentment. All of it surfaced at once.

"I never intended to need it." Slowly, she tightened her grip around it. "But if he reaches us before the project is finished..." Her voice cracked. "Then I'll stop him myself." Her voice trembles. The room fell silent.

"Don't be a fool," the younger man said nervously. "That thing might not even work." The woman laughed bitterly.

"It doesn't need to work forever." Her eyes became cold. "Only long enough." She looked toward the north as though she could already see him coming.

"I will stop that whore's son..." Her fingers clenched around the object until her knuckles turned white.
"...even if it kills me."

"Do as you wish. As long as you don't soil my plan, because I will kill you," The man in charge said

In the heart of Tagayia, another meeting was taking place.

The meeting took place in a secluded room deep within Ko'alsi City, far from curious ears. Around the table sat Salka and several of the men who had quietly helped put the plan into motion. His whole squad of 10 was present, well, nine, counting that Lotaga was not present. The atmosphere was strangely relaxed, even though half the North was currently panicking over Sagiri's actions.

Sagiri leaned against the wall while Salka stared at him for several seconds before shaking his head.

"I told you I would kill you if you ever killed a Northerner." Sagiri didn't even blink.

"Well, kill me if you can." The room erupted in laughter. Even Salka barked out a laugh before reaching over and smacking the back of Sagiri's head. The gesture would've been insulting coming from anyone else, but from Salka, it felt affectionate.

"Still a small beast," Matasi muttered.

"And still alive," Sagiri replied.

That earned another round of laughter. In truth, none of them were as surprised as the rest of the North. The destruction of the southern garrison had looked reckless from the outside, as though Sagiri had finally lost himself to revenge. The reality was far different. The men stationed there had spent years pushing for war with the South.

It is clear they were not serving the mandra, but even the mandra could not do anything about it, and Sagiri had helped the man yet again and rendered a blow to the heart of his enemy.

Removing them had been the first move. A calculated move. One suggested by Salka's strategists after the information Sagiri had uncovered began fitting together.

"The fools are probably convinced you've gone completely mad," Salka said.

"Good." Sagiri's answer came immediately. "Let them think that." The older man's smile widened.

"You're learning," Yavaga said. "You will be as wise as I soon enough."

"Shut up," Matasi said. Banter continued as usual as they talked about their next course of action. Then, finally, Sagiri pushed away from the wall.

"I need another favor." He said

Salka groaned dramatically. "Of course you do."

"Watch my back while I finish this." The room quieted. "Pull N'varu out." Several of the men exchanged glances. Sagiri continued.

"The others with him, too. Once this starts moving, I don't want them caught in the middle." Salka's expression became more serious.

"And when you're done?" Salka asked.

"I go south," Sagiri said in a steady voice.

"You say that as though you'll survive long enough to do it. Don't underestimate the man. You should talk to Senraki, he will tell you a thing or two before you leave," Salka said

Sagiri smirked faintly.

"I usually survive." Salka stared at him before shaking his head.

"Look at you," Salka said, leaning back in his chair. "Ordering me around."

"Someone has to," Sagiri said.

"You were a brat the last time I saw you," Salka said.

"And now?" Salka looked him over. The crimson hair. The hollow eyes. The weight he carried.

"Now you're a dangerous brat." The room laughed again, but underneath the humor, everyone understood the truth. The pieces were moving. The plan had begun.

The discussion came to an abrupt end when the doors burst open with enough force to slam against the walls. Everyone in the room turned. A massive figure charged through the doorway without the slightest regard for dignity, protocol, or the fact that several important people were present.

"SAGIRI!" The shout echoed through the entire building. Before Sagiri could react, Lotaga crossed the room in seconds and threw his arms around him in a crushing embrace.

"YOU IDIOT!" he roared. "Do you have any idea how worried I was?" Sagiri disappeared entirely within the giant man's hug. "I heard you were fighting armies! Then I heard you attacked a garrison! Then I heard you rode a giant beast into Alika! Where is the beast?" He looked around as if the beast would suddenly pop out.

"Then I heard you kidnapped your parents! Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?" Several men around the table were openly laughing by now. Lotaga either didn't notice or didn't care. He simply squeezed harder. "I missed you, you little monster. You have grown to be just like me. Wise and strong." Lotaga wept dramatically, and Sagiri finally managed to free one arm.

"You're choking me." He said.

Salka's eye twitched watching the scene. The commander of one of the most feared military forces in the North had just barged into a confidential meeting and tackled the Supreme Chief of the South in front of everyone. Lotaga had finally moved a rank into a commander now, and he had men under him.

Typical Lotaga.

Lotaga finally released Sagiri and held him at arm's length. For a moment, his grin faded.

"You look terrible." The room quieted slightly. Even Lotaga could see it. The pale skin. The hollow eyes. The weight Sagiri had lost. Concern flickered behind his eyes.

"Who did this?" Sagiri rolled his eyes. Even Sagiri found himself smirking slightly. Some things, it seemed, never changed.

"You almost squeezed me to death." Sagiri and Lotaga gasped dramatically. He could never grow up, could he?

Chapter 363: WOMAN IN RED

The meeting took place among broken cliffs far from any road or settlement, deep in the west and rocky wasteland of Tagayia.

The wind carried dust through the stone formations as Sagiri stood alone, his crimson eyes fixed on the woman dressed in red. The cloak swept in the wind, making her fragile form look more fragile. For several moments, neither moved. Then Sagiri spoke.

"So we meet again." His voice was cold. "Supreme Chief of the South..." A faint smile appeared on his face. "...or should I say, imposter?" Sagiri said in a cold voice. The woman's expression did not change and remained cold as it was still set on Sagiri.

"So what if I am an imposter. You are stupid for coming here." Her answer was immediate.

"Perhaps," Sagiri replied. "But not as stupid as someone who thought they could hide from me forever." The woman's eyes narrowed. The air grew tense. Then Sagiri sighed. A heartbeat later, he struck the ground with the end of Nokai. Darkness erupted from the stone. The Archive answered instantly.

Black tendrils exploded upward and wrapped around the woman before she could react. The surrounding rock groaned as the pressure intensified. The disguise shattered. Not physically, but as though the darkness itself peeled away the lies she had hidden behind. The woman stumbled forward as the Archive released her. She hit one knee, coughing violently.

Blood stained her lips. For a moment, she remained there breathing hard. Then she began laughing. Softly at first. Then harder. Louder. The sound echoed through the cliffs. Sagiri watched her without expression. The laughter continued until tears appeared in her eyes. Finally, she looked up at him.

The woman immediately tried to force herself upright the moment the disguise was stripped away. Muscles bulged in her neck and shoulders as she fought against the black restraints pinning her down, but the Archive answered her resistance with merciless force. The darkness wrapped tighter around her limbs and shoulders, forcing her back onto her knees.

Stone beneath her cracked from the effort. Sagiri watched the struggle in silence for several moments before finally speaking.

"I rather like you on your knees," Sagiri said. "You seem to have a problem admitting that I am now the Mfalu of the south and you are nothing you have always been," Sagiri said

The words were soft, almost casual, but they struck harder than a slap. The woman's face twisted with fury. Her entire body trembled with the effort of standing again. She managed to rise a few inches before the darkness dragged her back down. Sagiri took a slow step forward, his crimson eyes studying her face now that the lies had been stripped away.

"Now then," he said quietly, tilting his head slightly, "should I call you the former Supreme Chief of the South..." His gaze hardened. "...or Rika, the last woman of the N'folu Clan?" Sagiri snarled.

For the first time since the confrontation began, something flashed across her face. The name had landed exactly where he intended. Rika's breathing became ragged. She struggled once more against the restraints before finally giving up and remaining on her knees, not out of surrender but because she understood she could not overpower the Archive.

Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Then suddenly she laughed. It started as a low chuckle before growing into something uglier. Something broken. The laughter echoed through the rocks around

them until it sounded almost inhuman. When she finally looked up at him, her eyes were filled with hatred so old it seemed fossilized.

"There he is." She grinned through the blood. "I was beginning to wonder if the little boy survived." Her eyes burned with a strange mixture of hatred and amusement. "Tell me, Sagiri... did the memories break you?" The wind howled between the rocks as the two stared at one another.

Sagiri restrained himself. He had known this truth since he entered the hell pool. This is the truth he had struggled with the most, but now, looking at the woman in front of him, all he could feel was a lot of nothing.

Sagiri remained silent in the face of her clear provocations.

"You are going to die," she hissed. Her voice dripped venom. "Just like Rina." A cruel smile stretched across her blood-stained lips. "Your whore mother." The words hung in the air between them.

He did not blink. He simply stared down at her. Then something inside his eyes changed. The murderous intent that leaked from him became so dense that the air itself felt heavy. For the first time since she began laughing, Rika's smile faltered.

Sagiri stared at her for a few moments longer before slowly cocking his head to the side. The motion was almost curious. Almost thoughtful. Yet there was something deeply unsettling about it.

"If I'm going to die," he said quietly, "then you're going to die here for sure." His voice held no anger. Rika's jaw tightened. She tried once more to rise, and the Archive immediately forced her back down, black tendrils tightening around her shoulders and arms until the stone beneath her knees groaned. Sagiri watched her struggle with detached interest.

"What I wonder," he continued, taking another slow step forward, "is why." The wind stirred his crimson hair.

"I have seen the memories. I have seen enough to know this wasn't something that happened overnight." His eyes narrowed slightly. "You destroyed your own people. Helped destroy them." A pause followed.

"Why?" Sagiri asked. After all, even with the memories of the archive, he could read people's hearts. A man's heart is a treacherous thing.

Rika remained silent. The hatred in her eyes only deepened. Sagiri sighed.

"Don't tell me it was something pathetic." His gaze hardened. "Don't tell me you were simply jealous because the Archive didn't choose you." The reaction was immediate. Rika's entire body went rigid. The laughter lines vanished from her face. Her breathing sharpened. Even the hatred twisted into something uglier. Something wounded. Sagiri noticed it instantly.

"Ah." A faint smile touched his lips. "So I touched the right nerve." The darkness around them seemed to pulse in response to his mood.

"All this death. All this betrayal. Entire generations wiped out." He looked down at her. "And somewhere in the middle of it sits a woman angry because something wasn't hers." Rika's teeth clenched so hard that blood appeared where she bit into her own lip.

"You know nothing," she snarled. The words emerged almost as a growl. "Nothing." Sagiri's expression didn't change. "Then explain it to me." He spread his hands slightly.

"Because from where I'm standing, it looks very much like the Archive looked at you..." His crimson eyes locked onto hers. "...and chose someone else because you were never worthy."

Chapter 364: LAST WOMAN OF N'FOLU

Rika's face twisted violently at Sagiri's words. The hatred in her eyes deepened until it looked less like emotion and more like a living thing clawing its way to the surface. Then something strange happened. Her left eye flickered. For the briefest moment, the iris turned a deep crimson before returning to normal.

Sagiri immediately noticed it. His eyes narrowed. He had sensed it from the moment he met her, but now he was certain. Something had been done to her. Something unnatural. Her scent was wrong.

Human, yes, but not entirely. Beneath the familiar scent of blood, sweat, and dust was something else. Something tainted. Corrupted. It was faint, yet impossible to miss once noticed. The realization had barely settled when Rika suddenly smiled. It wasn't a sane smile. It was the smile of someone who had already stepped beyond reason.

"You think you understand," she hissed. "You think the Archive chose you because you were special?" Her laughter returned, harsher this time. Then, before Sagiri could respond, her hand disappeared beneath her cloak. Metal flashed. A strange blade appeared in her grip, black and jagged, covered in markings that seemed to writhe across its surface. Sagiri's eyes widened slightly. The moment the weapon appeared, he felt the Archive recoil. Rika moved instantly.

The blade sliced through the darkness, binding her. Instead of resisting the Archive directly, the weapon severed the tendrils themselves. One after another, the black restraints snapped apart. The darkness recoiled as though wounded. Then Rika exploded backward.

Her speed was shocking. She crossed dozens of paces in a blur and landed atop a large boulder several meters away. The stone cracked beneath her feet. Sagiri remained standing where he was, but for the first time since the confrontation began, genuine surprise crossed his face. That movement had been impossible. The woman he remembered should not have possessed that level of strength or agility.

Her breathing had changed. Her posture had changed. Even the air around her felt different now. More dangerous. Her left eye flashed crimson again.

"There," she said, raising the blade slightly. "Now we can talk properly. I would rather hate being on my knees." She said in a shrill voice. The wind howled between the rocks as the severed remnants of the Archive dissolved into darkness around them. Sagiri's gaze remained fixed on the weapon. Then on her eye. Then, there was the unnatural scent pouring from her body. Whatever had happened to Rika, it had started long before the fall of the N'folu. And for the first time, Sagiri wondered whether she was truly the mastermind behind the destruction... or merely another victim of something far worse.

Rika's grip tightened around the strange blade until her knuckles turned white. The crimson glow in her left eye pulsed again, stronger this time. "Rika did not deserve the Archive," she snarled. The words exploded out of her like poison that had been festering for decades. "She was reckless. Impulsive. Uncultured. She broke rules, ignored tradition, and laughed in the faces of those who spent their entire lives mastering the clan's teachings." Her breathing grew heavier with every word.

"Yet she became Keeper." The blade trembled in her hand. "She became the head of the clan." Her voice cracked. "She became everything." Sagiri stared at her from below without moving.

She was driven by jealousy. She reminded him of someone or two people who were just as rotten to the core. At least for them, the world made them monsters.

"And you think you were worthy?" The question struck harder than an attack. Rika froze. Sagiri slowly looked her up and down. At the tainted scent pouring from her body. At the unnatural eye. At the weapon that made even the Archive recoil.

"Now?" he added quietly. "You call yourself worthy now?" His gaze sharpened.

"Look at yourself, Rika. Or should I call you aunt?" The wind howled between the cliffs. "You turned yourself into a beast." Something snapped. Rika's face twisted with rage.

"A beast?" she screamed. "A beast?" Her voice echoed through the rocks.

"Do you know what I sacrificed?" The crimson glow spread further through her eye. "Do you know how many years I spent watching her take everything that should have been mine?" She took a step forward.

"I was the better student." Another step. "The better fighter." Another. "The better strategist." The stone beneath her feet cracked. "I dedicated my life to the clan while she ran wild and did whatever she wanted!" Her breathing became ragged.

"The Archive should have chosen me." The words came out like a confession of a madwoman. "It should have chosen me." Her voice broke. "But it chose her." Tears mixed with rage in her eyes.

"And after it chose her, everyone else did too." Her laughter returned, broken and ugly. "The elders. The warriors. The clan." She pointed the blade directly at Sagiri. "Then she had you." The hatred in her face became something terrifying. "Even after she died, she still kept taking from me." Her hand shook. "You inherited the Archive." Her voice dropped into a whisper. "You inherited the relics." Then it rose into a scream.

"You inherited everything!" The cliffs trembled beneath the force of her fury. "She deserved to die!" she shrieked. "And you deserve to die even more!" The blade pulsed with crimson light. "Because you are her son." Her eye burned like a coal. "Because she took everything from me..." Her smile widened into something monstrous. "...and now you're doing it again." Her voice trembled.

Rika's chest rose and fell violently as she stared at Sagiri. Then, slowly, her expression changed. The madness remained, but beneath it appeared something else. Satisfaction. A cruel smile spread across her face.

"The formation has finally been finished." She laughed softly. "All these years." Her fingers tightened around the blade. "All these years preparing." The crimson glow in her left eye intensified. "I kept the bones of the Thirteen." The words caused Sagiri's eyes to narrow slightly.

"Every single one." Her smile widened. "The head of the thirteen clans." The air suddenly felt heavier. "The formation that once protected the clan..." Her voice became almost reverent. "...I rebuilt it." The ground trembled. "And now..." The smile became vicious. "...I am using it in reverse." Suddenly, the earth beneath the cliffs exploded with light. Ancient symbols ignited one after another across the stone. Lines of crimson energy raced through the rocks like veins awakening after centuries of sleep.

Sagiri immediately felt it. The world shifted. The air became dense, heavy, and oppressive. Then, thirteen pillars of crimson light erupted around him. One. Two. Three. Until all thirteen stood surrounding him in a perfect circle. The moment the final pillar appeared, the formation completed itself. Power surged through the land. Sagiri found himself standing at its exact center.

The pressure descended immediately. Not enough to crush him, but enough to trap him. Enough to slow him. Rika threw back her head and laughed. "Do you feel it?" The crimson light reflected in her eyes.

"This place is your grave." The formation roared louder. The symbols burned brighter.

"You are not leaving here." Her blade split apart. Then split again until multiple crimson-edged weapons hovered around her like predatory beasts. "You will remain trapped inside until the formation drains every last drop of strength from your body." Her smile became savage. "Then you will die exactly the way your clan died." Suddenly, she moved. The stone shattered beneath her feet. Her speed exploded beyond anything she had displayed earlier. Multiple blades shot forward alongside her.

"You die here!" she screamed. The crimson weapons descended like a storm as Rika charged directly toward the center of the formation, where Sagiri stood waiting.

Chapter 365: SAGIRI VS RIKA

The moment Rika entered the formation, the battlefield erupted into chaos. Crimson blades descended from every direction, moving so fast that they became streaks of red light.

Sagiri vanished from the spot where he had been standing a heartbeat earlier. The stone exploded beneath him as multiple weapons struck the ground. He reappeared several paces away only to immediately twist sideways as Rika's black blade swept past his throat.

The edge missed him by less than an inch.

A cold sensation crawled down his spine. He did not need the Archive to tell him that allowing that weapon to touch him would be a mistake. Something about it felt wrong. The weapon felt familiar but twisted now. Dangerously so, as though the blade itself hungered for him.

Rika pressed forward relentlessly. Every strike carried murderous intent. Every movement was designed to kill. Sagiri avoided another slash, ducked beneath a second, and drove a kick toward her ribs. Rika blocked and slid backward before instantly lunging again.

The formation pulsed around them. Thirteen pillars of crimson light roared brighter with every passing second. Sagiri could feel the effect now. The Archive was being strangled. Normally, darkness would have flooded the battlefield the moment he decided a fight was serious. Instead, whenever traces of the Archive leaked from him, the formation immediately drank it away.

Black tendrils emerged for only a moment before being swallowed by crimson light. The pressure inside the formation continued to increase. It was not merely trapping him. It was suffocating him. Choking the very power that had carried him this far.

Rika must have noticed it too. Her smile widened.

"Do you feel it?" she laughed as her blade crashed against Nokai. Sparks exploded between black and crimson steel. "The same formation that once protected the Archive now devours it." Sagiri dodged yet another attack, moving with ease. Even with the archive chock-full and him trapped, he was not yet cornered.

She spun and launched a kick toward his head. Sagiri raised an arm to block. The impact sent him sliding several meters across the stone. Before he could recover, the floating blades attacked again. He dodged left. Right. Forward. Backward. One crimson weapon sliced through his sleeve.

Another cut several strands of hair from his head. A third struck the ground where his chest had been an instant before. Rika never stopped advancing. She moved like a woman possessed, attacking with a ferocity that bordered on madness.

Sagiri's expression remained calm, but inside, he was rapidly calculating. He could still match her speed. He could still match her skill. But the longer the battle continued, the stronger the formation became, while the weaker he grew. This place had been designed specifically to kill him. Rika was not trying to defeat him. She was trying to keep him trapped until the formation finished the job for her.

Such a foolishly cunning woman. She was the type that could not stop at nothing to further her ends.

Another slash came. Sagiri bent backward just enough for the jagged blade to pass over his face. The weapon screamed through the air. For a brief moment, he saw strange crimson veins pulsing beneath its surface. Then instinct exploded inside him. He twisted violently.

The blade changed direction mid-swing and stabbed toward his heart. It should have been impossible. Rika's grin widened as the weapon seemed to move on its own. Sagiri barely avoided it. The tip scraped across his chest and carved a shallow line through his clothes.

Pain immediately shot through his body. Not ordinary pain. Something darker. Something invasive. It was almost like the time eating poison Lira had pumped into him back then. Only now, he had been constantly in pain, but the current pain did not. His eyes widened. Even the smallest touch had affected him. Rika laughed.

"Now you're beginning to understand." She raised the blade again, crimson light dancing along its edge. Around them, the thirteen pillars roared louder. The formation tightened. The Archive weakened even further and rapidly. And for the first time since arriving, Sagiri realized he might actually be in danger.

Sagiri exhaled slowly and opened his hand. It was about time he got serious now. If that blade had cut him any deeper. The archive could have been crippled.

"Nokai." The response was immediate. The black blade appeared in his grasp with a violent shriek that echoed throughout the formation. Darkness exploded from the weapon, only for most of it to be swallowed almost instantly by the crimson pillars surrounding them.

Normally, the battlefield would have disappeared beneath an ocean of shadows, but here, however, only fragments remained.

Thin ribbons of darkness curled around the blade before being devoured by the formation. Sagiri clicked his tongue. He hated fighting like this. Across from him, Rika laughed.

"What's wrong? Can't use your precious Archive?" Then she attacked again. Nokai collided with the jagged crimson weapon. The impact sent shockwaves through the stone beneath them. Rika's floating blades joined the assault immediately, forcing Sagiri into constant motion.

He parried one strike, ducked beneath another, twisted around a third, and drove Nokai toward her throat. She narrowly avoided it and retaliated with a slash aimed at his stomach. The battle became a blur of steel and movement.

Both vanished and reappeared across the formation in bursts of speed that ordinary warriors could never follow.

Even without the archive at its full strength, Sagiri had still been trained by the best of the best, and he was sure that if Salk was trapped in the formation, the man could still win against the raging woman.

Sparks erupted whenever their weapons collided. Cracks spread across the battlefield. Stone shattered beneath their feet. Yet as the fight continued, Sagiri began noticing something unsettling.

Rika seemed faster than before. Stronger. Her attacks grew heavier with each exchange.

The floating blades moved more aggressively.

The crimson glow in her eye brightened. At first, he thought the formation was empowering her somehow. Then realization settled over him. It wasn't that she was becoming stronger.

He was becoming weaker.

The formation was draining him piece by piece. Every second spent inside it chipped away at the Archive. Every movement felt slightly heavier than before. Every breath required more effort. Rika noticed the change too. Her smile widened into something vicious.

"You see it now, don't you?" she hissed as her blade slammed against Nokai hard enough to send him skidding backward.

"This formation was built to protect the Archive. Nobody understood it better than our people. Reverse its flow..." She raised her weapon. "...and it becomes the perfect cage." She taunted.

Sagiri steadied himself and wiped blood from the corner of his mouth.

Around him, the thirteen pillars continued to roar. Crimson light flooded the battlefield. The Archive inside him felt increasingly distant, like a voice being drowned beneath crashing waves.

Despite that, his expression remained calm. His crimson eyes never left Rika. She mistook his silence for desperation and charged again with a triumphant scream. Sagiri simply tightened his grip on Nokai. If the Archive could not win this fight, then he would. The old-fashioned way.

Steel against steel.

Perhaps he could toy with her a little longer.

Chapter 366: CRACKS IN THE FORMATION

The fight raged on with the two going at each other's throats for a few more minutes.

Sagiri suddenly vanished from the center of the formation where they had been fighting and reappeared perched sideways against one of the thirteen crimson pillars, balanced effortlessly.

Nokai rested across his shoulders while crimson energy continued pouring from his body into the formation. Rika immediately swung around to face him, her floating blades circling protectively as a triumphant smile spread across her face.

The formation was draining him faster than ever now. Visible streams of darkness and crimson power were being ripped from him and swallowed by the pillars. For a moment, Sagiri looked exhausted.

His skin seemed paler and growing even paler by the moment. His breathing grew heavier. He slowly closed his eyes while the formation roared louder, greedily devouring more and more of the Archive.

Rika's laughter echoed through the cliffs.

"You can't escape. I don't know what you intend to do, but you can't win. Just roll over and die and be a good nephew." Sagiri remained silent. The pillars blazed brighter. More archive power vanished into them.

Rika's laughter became increasingly hysterical as she watched what she believed was the inevitable death of the man she hated most.

Then, after a long moment, Sagiri opened his eyes, which had been closed while he stayed unmoving on the pillar. The crimson within them had not faded.

It had deepened into something darker, richer, almost black around the edges. Rika's laughter faltered.

Something about the way he was looking at her made an unfamiliar chill crawl through her body. For the first time since activating the formation, she felt uneasy. Sagiri smiled faintly.

"How are you still able to use the eyes of the echo?" She snarled, her lips trembling.

"Rika... Rika" Sagiri said quietly, and her grip tightened around her weapon.

"What?" For a moment, Sagiri simply looked around at the thirteen blazing pillars surrounding them.

"Your formation can indeed keep the Archive trapped." His smile widened slightly. "But...can it contain it? How much longer can it contain it?" Rika froze instantly. The laughter vanished from her face. For several heartbeats, neither moved.

"Look at your pillars with those beast eyes of yours. Sagiri said, and Rika looked around. Then she noticed it.

The pillars were no longer merely draining the Archive. They were swelling with it. The formation had spent the entire battle greedily consuming every fragment of power it could pull from him.

Generations of accumulated memories. Countless echoes.

Endless darkness is buried within the relic itself. And now the pillars were beginning to shake.

Tiny cracks appeared along the nearest one. A heartbeat. One impossibly massive heartbeat. The crimson light flickered. Rika's eyes widened, but she tried to hide it. Sagiri slowly rose to his feet atop the pillar while darkness began leaking from the cracks spreading through the formation.

The formation had been designed to suppress the Archive, not endlessly consume it. And for the last several minutes, it had been force-feeding itself directly from the source. Sagiri's smile never left his face.

"I was wondering how much it could hold," Sagiri said in a cold tone. Another heartbeat thundered through the battlefield, louder than before.

The cracks spread violently across all thirteen pillars. Rika took an involuntary step backward. For the first time since the battle began, fear appeared in her eyes.

"You forgot a very important lesson, Aunt. This formation was meant to protect first, and it was held by thirteen living people. You are alone, and even with their thirteen bones, they still hold the memory of what they wish to do. It could have worked even so. Against a weaker relic, but this is the archive aunt. You are foolish, just like I thought."

"You have tainted the memories of our ancestors for nothing. They should be resting in peace, but you..." Sagiri looked at Rika with disgust. She was the type of person who had no respect and no lines to draw. The kind of person he had to kill.

Sagiri looked down at the spreading cracks crawling across the thirteen pillars and then back at Rika. Despite the exhaustion written across his face, a faint smile lingered there.

"I have indeed been weakened," he admitted. "More than you know." His voice was calm, almost conversational.

"In the next minute, you can kill me if you wish." He glanced briefly at the trembling formation surrounding them. "Well... if you can." Another colossal heartbeat shook the battlefield. More cracks appeared.

Crimson light spilled through them in violent bursts.

Sagiri's smile widened slightly.

"The moment this formation breaks, I will surely kill you." His crimson eyes locked onto hers.

"So, Aunt..." The word dripped with mockery. "...kill me before I kill you." The words were icy. For a second, there was silence. Then something inside Rika finally snapped. Her face twisted into pure fury.

"Shut up!" she roared.

The sound echoed through the cliffs like the scream of a wounded beast. The crimson glow in her left eye exploded outward. Veins spread across her face. Her body convulsed violently.

The strange taint hidden within her scent suddenly surged to the surface. Muscles expanded beneath her skin. Her nails lengthened into claws. Bones cracked loudly as her posture changed. One eye remained vaguely human while the other lost all trace of humanity, becoming a burning crimson slit filled with animalistic madness. Even her teeth sharpened.

The transformation stopped short of becoming a complete beast, but only barely. She had crossed some forbidden line long ago, and now she embraced it fully. The floating weapons orbiting her began vibrating wildly as crimson energy poured from her body into them.

The pressure rolling off her doubled.

Then tripled. The ground beneath her feet exploded.

She launched herself forward with such speed that the air itself screamed. The cliffside shattered in her wake. One moment, she was dozens of meters away. Next, she was already upon him. Her blade descended toward his neck while the crimson weapons attacked from every direction at once.

Rika no longer cared about strategy. No longer cared about survival. The only thing left inside her was the desperate need to kill him before the formation collapsed. Above them, the thirteen pillars groaned, and the cracks widened. Darkness poured from them in waves.

The formation was dying.

And both of them knew it. Rika moreso. She was acting like a wounded beast, which she was at the moment.

"Well, then, Aunt, 56 seconds remain before I kill you," Sagiri said, dodging the hundredth attack in the last few seconds.

Chapter 367. A MINUTE TO KILL

The battlefield descended into complete madness with Rika trying to kill Sagiri as fast as possible. Every passing second brought another deafening crack from the thirteen pillars as fractures raced wildly across their surfaces, and with every crack Rika went mad. Her attacks were becoming more reckless and lethal.

Crimson light poured through them in violent streams while the formation groaned under the unbearable pressure of the Archive trapped within it.

Sagiri felt every heartbeat of it, but he could no longer spare a glance.

Rika had become a relentless storm. Her movements had lost all restraint, her beast-like body throwing itself at him with terrifying ferocity.

Nokai clashed against her corrupted blade again and again, sparks exploding between black and crimson steel as the floating weapons assaulted him from every direction.

He could no longer attack. The formation had taken all his strength. He could only try to move as fast as Salka. He was completely cornered. Every ounce of his concentration went into surviving.

He twisted beneath one blade, knocked another aside, ducked beneath a sweeping claw, only for a second claw to catch him before he could recover.

"Die!" Rika roared. The beastly paw slammed into his side with enough force to shatter stone. Sagiri's body was launched through the air like a ragdoll before crashing violently into one of the crimson pillars.

The entire formation shook from the impact. Cracks burst across the pillar beneath him as the force echoed through the remaining twelve.

Sagiri slid down the stone and dropped to one knee.

A violent cough escaped him, and blood splashed across the crimson-lit ground. His vision blurred for a heartbeat. Across the battlefield, Rika saw her chance. Her monstrous grin stretched wider than ever.

"I've won! Now you die," she screamed. Every floating blade turned toward Sagiri at once. The corrupted weapon in her hand pulsed with crimson light as she thrust it forward.

All of the blades shot toward him simultaneously, converging upon his heart from every direction.

At that exact instant, the formation reached its limit. A sound unlike anything either of them had ever heard tore through the battlefield. It was as though the world itself had cracked. Every pillar shattered at once. Crimson light exploded outward in a blinding wave while the Archive, imprisoned for so long, erupted free in an endless torrent of darkness.

The two events happened simultaneously. Rika's killing strike descended. The formation exploded. And the battlefield vanished beneath an ocean of black.

Darkness exploded outward with the collapse of the formation, swallowing the entire battlefield in an instant.

The cliffs vanished and the sky disappeared. Even the crimson glow of Rika's weapons was consumed until the world resembled a bottomless void.

For several long heartbeats, neither of them could be seen.

The darkness became so absolute that it felt less like night and more like existence itself had ceased. Then it began to move. Slowly at first, the endless black started folding inward, drawn toward a single point.

Faster and faster it spiraled until the entire ocean of darkness rushed toward one small point.

Sagiri.

The ground trembled beneath the force of it. Every remaining strand of the Archive returned to its master in a violent torrent, disappearing into his body as though it had never left. The air grew impossibly heavy.

When the last trace vanished, Sagiri stood alone where the storm had ended. He somehow looked darker than before, as though the shadows clung to him.

His head remained lowered and his back slightly hunched over. He then finally moved.

When he finally looked up, his eyes were completely black. Not merely dark, but utterly devoid of color or light.

The sight froze Rika where she stood.

Then, slowly but gradually, crimson ignited within them, burning away the darkness until his familiar blood-red gaze returned, fiercer than it had ever been.

At the same moment, Nokai screamed.

The black blade burst apart in a violent shriek, splitting once... then again... and again, until twenty identical black blades hovered around Sagiri in perfect silence, their points aimed toward Rika like predators scenting blood.

The confidence drained from her face.

For the first time since the battle began, genuine fear took hold. She instinctively took a step backward. Sagiri watched her without expression. His voice, when it came, was quiet enough to make it even more terrifying.

"I gave you an entire minute to kill me, Aunt; it was more than you gave our clan before you wiped them out." One of the twenty blades slowly rotated toward her throat. Then another. Then all of them moved as one.

"But you didn't." He took a single step forward. The ground beneath his foot fractured.

"Now..." His crimson eyes locked onto hers with absolute finality. "...it's your time to die." Sagiri said.

"You are still poisoned by my blades... you will be dead either way." Rika snarled.

Sagiri chuckled

"Yes I am poisoned but dying from it... You are stupid to even think so, Aunt." Sagiri said.

"It can't be. The archive should have been crippled completely" Rika said.

"It could have worked on me months ago before I got the relics... now it will just weaken me for a day or two or a week but you won't be alive that long

Sagiri sighed and just waved his hand.

The instant the final word left Sagiri's mouth, ten of the twenty black blades vanished. Rika reacted fast, weaving through the blades to escape Sagiri's attack. She was first indeed and being a nfolu trained in the desert her movements are fluid. Rika's instincts screamed a heartbeat before the first blade appeared at her shoulder.

She twisted violently, the edge missing her neck by the width of a finger before burying itself into the cliff behind her with a deafening boom. She had no time to breathe. A second blade materialized beneath her ribs.

She kicked off the ground, flipping over it as it carved a trench through the stone. The third came from above. The fourth from directly behind. The fifth crossed the paths of the others, forcing her body into impossible angles just to remain alive. Every dodge flowed into another before her feet could even touch the ground.

She was a blur

She bounced from boulder to boulder, twisted through impossibly narrow gaps, rolled beneath one blade only to arch backward as another screamed inches above her face. Explosions of shattered rock echoed across the valley as each missed strike gouged enormous scars into the landscape. Dust and debris filled the air, reducing the battlefield to chaos.

Rika's breathing became ragged.

Sweat mixed with blood as several blades grazed her arms and legs, each near miss reminding her that a single mistake would be fatal. Yet the assault refused to slow. The blades hunted her with terrifying precision, changing direction in mid-flight as though they possessed minds of their own, relentlessly cutting off every escape route she found.

The remaining ten blades floated silently behind him while he watched the chase unfold with cold, unwavering eyes. Rika was fighting someone who had already decided exactly how she was going to die.

Sagiri was in no rush.

Chapter 368: NEW ARRIVAL

The Archive exploded upward in countless tendrils, wrapping around Rika's wrists, ankles, waist, and throat before she could react.

Sagiri was about done with her.

It was time she died, and he wanted to look in her eyes as he finished her off.

She crashed hard onto one knee as the restraints tightened with merciless force. Every attempt to move only caused the tendrils to constrict further. Her claws dug furrows into the stone, but she could not break free.

Sagiri finally moved.

He raised a single hand, and the ten hunting blades immediately abandoned their pursuit, reversing direction in perfect formation. They returned to him one after another, joining the ten that had never left his side until all twenty hovered silently behind him like a shield.

He walked toward Rika without haste. Each footstep echoed through the shattered battlefield.

Then, with a slight movement of his fingers, the Archive lifted her completely off the ground. The tendrils tightened around her throat, choking the breath from her lungs as she clawed desperately at the darkness crushing her neck.

Slowly, inexorably, she was dragged toward him until their faces were only inches apart. Sagiri looked into her terrified eyes without a trace of satisfaction. There was only cold finality.

"Now, Aunt..." he said quietly, "...are you ready to meet our tribe?"

Behind him, all twenty blades slowly rose into the air.

Their points aligned perfectly with Rika's body, each aimed at a vital point. The air itself seemed to hold its breath. She still held that defiant look in her eyes, but Sagiri could smell her fear as clear as day now. Sagiri closed his hand. The blades began to move.

All 20 were not necessary o kill her but Sagiri was not planning o hold back.

BUM!

Then suddenly something struck him.

The impact came from nowhere.

A violent force slammed into his side hard enough to throw him several meters across the shattered ground. For the first time that day, Sagiri's eyes widened in genuine surprise.

Impossible.

He should have sensed the attack long before it reached him. The Archive released Rika as his concentration broke. He recovered almost instantly, twisting in midair before landing on one knee.

Nokai and all twenty blades snapped back into formation around him. He looked up. A figure stood where Rika had been. Cloaked entirely in black, impossible to distinguish as man or woman, the stranger held Rika's limp, half-conscious body over one shoulder as though she weighed nothing.

Their eyes met for the briefest instant. Then the figure vanished. They accelerated so violently that the air detonated where they had stood, leaving only a blur racing across the ruined cliffs. Sagiri shot after

them without hesitation. The ground exploded beneath every step as he pursued at full speed, crossing canyons and shattered rock in seconds.

The twenty blades screamed through the air behind him, searching, hunting. He caught fleeting glimpses of the fleeing silhouette several times, each one lasting only a heartbeat before it disappeared again. Faster. Always just beyond reach. Minutes later, he came to an abrupt halt atop a lonely cliff overlooking an endless sea of broken stone.

Silence greeted him.

No scent.

No footsteps.

No lingering presence.

It was as though the stranger had dissolved into the world itself. Sagiri slowly lowered Nokai. His breathing remained steady, but his eyes narrowed. That should not have happened. No one had ever approached him that closely without the Archive warning him.

He dared say that no even Salka could hide from him entirely now but yet...

Who was that?

No one had ever escaped him once he chose to pursue. Yet whoever or whatever that figure had been had done both. For the first time since leaving the N'folu homeland, Sagiri felt something he had not expected to feel.

Confusion.

Sagiri took one step forward, then another, before his legs suddenly gave way beneath him. He dropped onto one knee with a heavy thud, one hand slamming against the cracked stone to keep himself from collapsing completely.

A violent cough tore through his chest. Blood splashed across the ground in dark crimson streaks.

"Damn..." he muttered through gritted teeth. The shallow wound left by Rika's corrupted blade burned as though molten iron had been poured directly into his veins.

Whatever poison had entered his body was unlike anything he had encountered before.

It was not merely attacking his flesh. It was agitating the relics themselves. Deep within him, the Archive churned violently, its power fluctuating in erratic waves as though struggling against an invading force. Even Nokai trembled faintly in response.

Another cough wracked his body, forcing a second mouthful of blood from his lips. He clutched his chest as a sharp pain spread through every limb.

This poison should have killed him already. Any ordinary Keeper would have been dead long before now. Only the Archive's relentless vitality and the relics themselves were keeping his heart beating, but even they were paying a price.

His breathing became shallow.

"Not... now..." he whispered, forcing himself upright before another wave of agony bent him forward again.

He needed to recover. Not for weeks. Not even for months. A few days would be enough if he reached the right place.

His crimson eyes lifted toward the distant north. Galka. Beneath it lay the Endless Pool. The northern counterpart to the sacred waters beneath the South. If anywhere could purge whatever had been injected into him, it would be there. And while he was there... he needed answers.

Senraki would have them, or at the very least know where to begin looking. Another cough escaped him, thicker this time, blood running between his fingers as he pressed harder against his chest.

The poison was spreading faster than he liked. He could feel it gnawing at the relics, disturbing the delicate balance within him.

Remaining here was no longer an option. With visible effort, Sagiri forced himself back to his feet. His vision swam for a moment before steadying.

He wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, turned toward the north, and took a slow step forward. Every movement felt heavier than the last, but he refused to stop. He had survived too much to fall to poison.

Not before settling the debt that still waited for him.

Zaira, where are you? Sagiri's vision swarm.

Damn!!

Chapter 369: FAMILY

Sagiri's consciousness returned in fragments. First came the sound of wind rushing past him.

Then the steady rhythm of enormous movements shaking the earth beneath him. Everything else felt distant, as though he were trapped beneath an endless sea, struggling toward a surface that refused to come closer.

His eyelids fluttered open, only to close again as the world spun violently.

His vision was nothing but shifting blurs of light and shadow. He tried to breathe, but even that felt heavy. His chest burned with every breath, and the poison still gnawed at him from within.

Slowly, painfully, his sight began to clear. Beneath him was not stone. It was warm and alive.

He could hear the strong heartbeat and another beneath it.

Black scales stretched in every direction beneath his body. He was lying across the broad head of Zaira.

The colossal beast was moving at tremendous speed, each stride carrying them farther across the northern wilderness while the wind tore through Sagiri's crimson hair.

For several long moments, he simply stared, trying to understand. Then his lips parted.

"Zaira..." His voice was barely more than a whisper.

"...beauty... you came." The beast's massive ears twitched.

Without slowing, Zaira released a low rumble that rolled through its chest before gradually coming to a halt atop a lonely ridge overlooking an endless expanse of mountains. It lowered its enormous head with impossible gentleness, careful not to disturb its master.

A deep, mournful whimper escaped the creature, soft enough that only Sagiri could have heard it. It nudged him lightly with the side of its snout, golden eyes fixed upon him with unmistakable worry.

For all its terrifying size and monstrous strength, in that moment it looked less like a beast of war and more like a loyal companion terrified of losing the only person it had ever truly accepted.

Sagiri managed the faintest smile before another cough seized him, blood staining the black scales beneath him. He reached out with a trembling hand and rested it against Zaira's face.

"I'm... not dead yet," he murmured, stroking the beast weakly between the eyes. Zaira let out another quiet whimper, lowering its head even further as if refusing to leave his side until he could stand again.

Sagiri forced his heavy eyes open once more, the world still swimming before him.

It took several moments before he recognized the familiar rhythm beneath him and the direction of the stars overhead. They were heading south. A weary sigh escaped his lips.

He raised a trembling hand and rested it weakly against the warm scales beneath him.

"Zaira..." he whispered, his voice barely audible above the rushing wind. The great beast immediately slowed, one ear flicking backward to listen.

"We... can't go home yet." He swallowed painfully as another wave of poison surged through his veins. "We have to go north... to the Endless Pool... beneath Galka War Academy." His breathing became labored.

"I'll... get better there." Sagiri finished in a whisper.

Zaira released another low, mournful whimper, the sound carrying far more emotion than any roar she had ever unleashed in battle. She nudged her head slightly, as though protesting the decision, but Sagiri managed a faint smile.

"You know where it is..." he murmured. "Take me there..." Before he could say another word, agony exploded through his body. It felt as though molten iron had been poured directly into his veins.

The poison clawed at the relics again, forcing blood from his mouth as his vision dissolved into darkness.

He lost consciousness before he even felt himself collapse against the beast's scales. Time passed without meaning.

Then, suddenly, Sagiri jolted awake. Night had fallen. The stars stretched endlessly above them. A deafening roar shattered the silence, so violent that the surrounding mountains threw it back again and again in thunderous echoes.

Zaira.

The beast had stopped moving. Sagiri remained cradled securely between the enormous ridges of her scales, protected from being thrown even as every muscle in her colossal body tensed for battle.

Her head was lowered, her wing-like sides half-spread, black mist pouring from between her scales as another savage roar ripped through the darkness.

Yet Sagiri immediately understood something was wrong. This was not the roar of a beast eager to fight.

It was a warning. A desperate attempt to keep something away.

Despite the fury in her voice, she refused to lunge forward, refused to charge, refused to leave him exposed. Whatever stood before them had forced even Zaira into a defensive stance. Sagiri struggled to lift his head, pain stabbing through his chest with every movement.

Through blurred vision, he could just make out shapes moving beyond the darkness ahead. Someone... or something... had stopped them.

A calm voice finally broke the standoff.

"Zaira... we leave for a few days, and you forget us already?" The words carried an amused warmth that Sagiri recognized instantly.

N'varu.

Even through the haze clouding his mind, Sagiri could sense the others now. Nine familiar presences stood behind the boy, each calm, steady, and dangerous in their own right.

The Sandshades from whom N'varu was chosen to serve Sagiri.

Off to one side stood Salka and his squad, weapons already drawn, every one of them in a defensive stance. None of them had ever laid eyes upon a creature like Zaira before, and their instincts had reacted exactly as seasoned warriors should.

Unfortunately, Zaira's instincts had done the same.

The beast viewed every armed person before her as a potential threat to the poisoned master she carried between her scales.

Black mist seeped from her body as another guttural growl rolled from deep within her chest, her golden eyes never leaving Salka's men. One wrong movement and she would tear through them without hesitation.

Sagiri tried to raise himself, but a violent cough seized him instead. Blood splattered across Zaira's scales as pain ripped through his chest. The beast immediately answered with another earth-shaking roar, lowering her massive head protectively over him.

Even N'varu's robes fluttered beneath the force of it, though the boy did not move an inch. Sagiri finally managed to catch his breath.

"Zaira..." he said weakly, reaching out to pat one of the enormous scales beneath him. The beast's ear twitched, but she did not lower her guard. Sagiri sighed, exhausted. "They're my friends... you know this." Another low growl vibrated through her body.

He closed his eyes for a moment before speaking again, this time with the same tone one would use to calm a stubborn child.

"Stop throwing a tantrum." Silence followed. Then, almost reluctantly, Zaira let out a long, irritated huff. The black mist around her began to thin, and although she continued watching Salka's squad with unmistakable suspicion, she slowly lowered her head a fraction.

Salka finally released the breath he had been holding. One of his men quietly muttered,

"That thing understands him..."

N'varu merely smiled beneath his hood.

"Of course she does," he replied. "She's family."

Chapter 370: WARNING

After several tense moments, Zaira finally relented.

She lowered her massive body just enough to allow them aboard, though every movement made it abundantly clear that she was doing so only because Sagiri had asked. Even as Salka, N'varu, the Sandshades, and Lotaga climbed onto her broad back, the beast kept one golden eye fixed on them, releasing an occasional warning growl whenever someone moved too suddenly.

Salka glanced down at Sagiri's pale face and frowned deeply.

"You look like you're dying," he said bluntly.

The words had barely left his mouth before Zaira let out a distressed whimper, lowering her head protectively toward Sagiri as though trying to shield him from the statement itself. Despite the agony coursing through him, Sagiri managed the faintest smile.

"Don't... scare my beast," he muttered weakly, stroking one of her scales with trembling fingers. Zaira rumbled softly at the touch. Sagiri turned his eyes toward Salka.

"She'll listen to you... take us north... to Galka." His gaze drifted back to the beast. "Follow his instructions... beauty." Zaira gave a reluctant snort before launching herself forward, her colossal movements carrying them across the northern wilderness with astonishing speed.

"You call this thing beauty?" Koru asked and Yavaga slapped him.

"Shut up. I still don't feel safe. Don't provoke beauty." He said sarcastically. Lotaga was more silent than usual

Throughout the journey, Lotaga barely left Sagiri's side.

The large warrior worked frantically, forcing antidote after antidote between Sagiri's lips, applying poultices to the wound, checking his pulse, then trying yet another remedy moments later despite knowing none of them were working.

"Come on..." he muttered repeatedly. "One of these has to do something." But the poison ignored them all.

"Stop acting like a child. The poison in him is not something that can be healed by our antidotes." Matasi said standing impossibly still on the head of the beast.

Before long, Sagiri slipped back into unconsciousness.

He briefly surfaced again beneath the warmth of the afternoon sun, his vision catching only flashes of Zaira's black scales, distant mountains, and Lotaga's worried face leaning over him before darkness claimed him once more.

The next time he opened his eyes, night had fallen again.

Everything felt colder, even his body. He could hear dripping water somewhere nearby and smell ancient stone.

His body refused to move, however. Voices echoed through the darkness beyond him.

"...we can't just throw him into the water," Lotaga protested, panic evident in every word.

"He's barely breathing!" Another voice answered calmly.

N'varu.

"We have to." There was no hesitation in the old man's tone. "If we don't, he will die." Silence followed before the sound of footsteps echoed across the cavern floor. Sagiri slowly realized where he was. They had reached the hidden cave beneath the academy.

Beneath Galka War Academy. And somewhere ahead lay the Endless Pool.

Salka let out a long, weary sigh before stepping toward the edge of the Endless Pool. The ancient waters lay perfectly still, their black surface reflecting nothing. It was as though the pool consumed light itself.

He stopped at the water's edge and looked back once at the unconscious Sagiri lying in Lotaga's arms. "You better not die, Your pet is too big for me to care for," he muttered. Without waiting for anyone to answer, he lifted Sagiri onto his shoulder, took one final step, and threw him into the pool.

Zaira immediately surged forward with a distressed roar, stopping only at the very edge as the immense beast lowered herself until her snout almost touched the black water. She released a low, frightened whimper, her golden eyes never leaving her master.

Sagiri struck the surface without a splash. The water simply swallowed him the instant his body disappeared beneath it, every muscle in him convulsed violently. His eyes snapped open, and although no sound should have escaped beneath the depths, his entire body arched in unmistakable agony.

It felt as though every inch of his flesh had been plunged into living acid. The poison within him and the power of the relics reacted instantly to the pool. Veins bulged across his body as darkness burst from his skin in violent streams before being stripped away by the water.

His mouth opened in a silent scream that seemed to shake even the stillness of the pool.

Above, Zaira whimpered again. Beneath the surface, the torment continued. Every wound burned. Every bone felt as though it were being broken apart and forged anew. The poison fought desperately against the waters while the relics surged with unprecedented violence, each trying to dominate the other.

Minutes crawled by. Then, finally, the struggle ceased. The waters beneath Sagiri began to move. The darkness at the bottom of the Endless Pool opened into a vast abyss. A powerful current seized his body and pulled him downward.

Faster and faster he descended, deeper than any ordinary pool could reach. The last traces of light vanished above him. Then even the surface disappeared. Sagiri continued sinking into an endless darkness beneath the world, drawn toward something ancient waiting in the depths.

Above, the waters became perfectly still once more. Only Zaira's mournful whimper echoed through the cavern as she continued staring into the black pool, waiting for her master to return.

Sagiri continued falling through the endless darkness. There was no up or down, only an infinite abyss that accepted him without resistance. As he sank deeper, the waters around him began to glow with faint streams of silver light. They wound around his body like living threads, probing every wound, every torn muscle, every shattered vessel. Then the healing began.

The Endless just sucked the poison. Dark crimson veins burst beneath Sagiri's skin as the corrupted substance was ripped from his blood in violent streams. It resisted with desperate fury, twisting through his arteries like a living parasite, but the waters overwhelmed it completely. Every trace of corruption was dragged from his flesh, only to dissolve into nothingness the instant it touched the glowing currents. Sagiri's body convulsed over and over as organs that had begun to fail were torn apart and remade.

His heart stopped for a second... then beat again with renewed strength. His lungs collapsed before expanding once more, cleaner than before. Bones cracked throughout his body, becoming denser and stronger under the relentless pressure of the pool. Darkness poured from Sagiri's body in vast rivers.

The Archive spread around him like enormous wings before slowly wrapping around its master, inspecting every fragment of itself that had been damaged during the battle.

Wherever the darkness touched, the waters brightened.

The Archive began healing alongside its Keeper. Then the relics awakened. One after another they drifted free from Sagiri's body, suspended around him in perfect silence.

Nokai floated before his chest, its black blade humming softly as tiny fractures along its edge sealed themselves. The remaining relics shimmered faintly, each radiating its own ancient presence as they revolved around him in a slow circle.

They were not merely healing him.

They were healing themselves.

The Endless Pool had become their forge once more. Hours—or perhaps days—passed in absolute silence as the process continued. Sagiri descended ever deeper until finally the fall ended.

His back touched solid ground.

At the very bottom of the Endless Pool lay a vast plain of black stone stretching endlessly beneath the water, illuminated only by the silver glow flowing through it like veins beneath the earth.

Sagiri remained suspended just above it, eyes closed, while the relics settled into a perfect ring around him. Then the silence broke.

It was not a voice carried through water. It spoke directly into his mind, ancient beyond imagination, carrying the weight of countless generations. The poison has been purged. The Keeper has been restored.

The words lingered for a long moment before another followed, colder than the first. Hear this warning well, Keeper of the Archive. The silver currents surrounding him slowed. Even the relics became still.

The corruption that entered your body was not of ordinary origin. The relics endured it once. They will not endure it again. Sagiri remained motionless, listening. Should that poison enter your body a second time... neither this Pool, nor the Archive, nor the relics will be able to save you.

The ancient presence fell silent. The warning settled into him with terrifying certainty. If he allowed himself to be struck by that corrupted weapon again, death would not merely be possible.

It would be inevitable.

Sagiri almost laughed. He was already dying... That was inevitable and after seeing that person who saved his aunt he was sure something was in the waiting. His death could be prolonged, yes. Even if the man who wiped his clan did not manage to kill him. He had a choice to make...