

KEEPER 391

Chapter 391: SQUAD TWENTY- FIVE OATH REAFFIRMED

The sub-zero mountain gale howled between the towering black basalt walls of the Viper's Throat, swirling fine sheets of frost across the frozen canyon floor.

Sagiri kept his right hand planted against the wrapped hilt of Nokai, staring across the gravel at the seven familiar figures standing in the gloom.

His breath rose in thick white plumes against the starlight, his mind struggling to understand how they had caught up to his pace.

"What are you all doing here?" Sagiri asked, his voice rough and cutting through the whistling wind.

"You need to turn around and head back to the academy before the morning patrols notice you are gone."

"The High Council put the entire northern territory on lockdown, and anyone caught carrying weapons outside the perimeter will be executed for treason."

Maita scoffed aloud while kicking a frozen chunk of shale into the ditch, adjusting the leather harness of his twin short-swords with an irritated sneer.

"Do you have any idea what four miles of an abandoned garrison drainage flume smells like?" Maita complained, his face smeared with black soot.

"I smell like dead river rats and stagnant grease, and you want us to turn around and walk right back through it?"

Kaka did not shift his feet an inch, driving the iron rim of his heavy tower shield two inches into the frozen gravel.

"Shut up, Maita," Kaka rumbled, his voice as flat and heavy as the granite cliffs rising above them.

"Let the boy whine," Kiuga said with a lopsided grin, pulling down his woolen face wrap, "he almost slipped headfirst into the sludge three times."

"If you keep talking, Kiuga, I will throw you down this ravine," Kaka said, not even turning his head to look at him.

Sagiri stared at the three of them, feeling the familiar headache building behind his temples as their bickering filled the narrow mountain cut.

"I am not joking around," Sagiri said, taking a step forward while his crimson eyes narrowed in the dark.

"This is not another obstacle arena exercise or a mock skirmish in the northern woods."

"The man who took Rika is the same phantom who orchestrated the destruction of my clan in the South."

"Whoever is operating in that canyon has an army, and whoever goes down there might end up dead."

Kaka rested his massive, calloused hand against the top rim of his shield, looking directly down into Sagiri's glowing eyes without blinking.

"A man losing in battle is no shame," Kaka said in a low, stubborn growl.

"It only proves that the other man was stronger on that day."

"But turning around and running while a brother fights alone is what cowards do, and no Asakana runs from a fight."

"See?" Kiuga chuckled softly, nudging Kaka's armored shoulder with his elbow. "The big brute actually has a brain when he remembers to use it."

"Touch me again, Kiuga, and I will test how many of your ribs can bend before breaking," Kaka snapped.

"You two never change, do you?" Sagiri muttered, shaking his head as the heavy knot in his chest began to loosen.

Kiuga's expression settled into a sharper, more tactical focus as he stepped up beside Kaka's heavy iron barrier.

"Did you honestly think Squad 25 was going to sit in the barracks eating warm porridge while you ran off into the mountains alone?"

"Seyika mapped your exact vector before we even left the headquarters," Kiuga added, pointing a gloved finger down the gorge.

Above them on the western ledge, Bukata lowered his recurve bow and peered down into the frozen cut.

"Tripwires are set along the upper overflow chute," Bukata called down in his quiet, measured tone.

"If any northern tracker tries to drop through the grate behind us, they will bring twenty tons of loose boulders down on their heads."

Beside him, Zolinka gave the steel tension cable a sharp tug before slipping his wrench back into his leather belt pouch.

"The line will hold against the frost for at least four hours," Zolinka reported, sliding down the scree to join the rear line.

Ulekai and Zazarie stood at the southern bottleneck with their heavy halberds braced against the stone, keeping their eyes glued to the dark pass.

"The rear is clear," Zazarie said, checking the edge of his blade, "nobody followed our tracks out of the garrison."

Sagiri looked across the seven warriors, taking in their torn field cloaks, soot-covered faces, and the calm determination in their stances.

They were risking their sashes, their ranks, and their lives under northern martial law just to stand in the freezing mud beside him.

He had run northwest through the blizzards to spare them from the violence of his past, yet here they stood, ready for whatever lay ahead.

'They really are the most stubborn idiots in the entire North,' Sagiri thought, a faint smirk touching his lips before he exhaled slowly.

"Alright," Sagiri said, crouching low near the center of the path, "gather around and listen carefully."

Kiuga and Kaka leaned in close beneath the overhang, with Maita and the others closing the circle to block the freezing wind.

"The trail ahead carries a foul chemical stench that I recognized the moment I entered the gorge," Sagiri explained in a low voice.

"It belongs to the masked man who was in the woods that day."

Kaka's heavy jaw tightened with an audible snap, his dark eyes flashing with sudden recognition.

"The man you chased all the way to Galka?" Kiuga asked

"That is him," Sagiri confirmed, nodding toward the dark ravine opening half a league ahead.

"I felt the vibrations through the bedrock earlier," Sagiri said, pressing his palm against the stone to emphasize the point.

"Whatever facility he built out here is buried deep underground in the rock, hidden completely beneath solid granite."

"There are no surface fortress walls, no watchtowers, and no visible gates out in the open."

"We will have to scout the canyon floor to find where the entrance is sealed beneath the stone."

Kiuga pulled a small charcoal slate from his vest, studying the elevation lines Seyika had sketched before their departure.

"If the complex is buried under the rock, they must have ventilation shafts and freight ruts," Kiuga reasoned.

"That means there is a reinforced road or an underground tunnel entrance wide enough for cargo."

"We move in standard wedge formation," Kiuga instructed, looking around at the squad members.

"Kaka takes the point with the heavy shield, Bukata watches the high ledges, and Maita covers the left flank."

"Zolinka, Ulekai, and Zazarie hold the rear line to make sure we don't get boxed in from behind."

"Stop giving speeches and start moving," Kaka grunted, hauling his massive shield up and turning toward the lower path.

Maita drew his twin short-swords with a crisp metallic click, rolling his shoulders to shake off the bitter cold.

"If we get killed in this frozen ditch, I am haunting all of you for the rest of eternity," Maita muttered.

Sagiri tightened the gray linen wraps around Nokai, stepping into the center of the wedge formation beside Kiuga.

The sub-zero wind screamed through the high crags above, but inside the narrow canyon cut, the cold had completely lost its bite.

They were no longer separate warriors chasing shadows in the dark; they were eight brothers moving with lethal, unified purpose.

Together, Squad 25 surged forward into the Bleeding Gorge, ready to hunt down whatever was buried in the deep earth below.

Chapter 392: SCOURTING

The jagged rim of the Bleeding Gorge dropped into a sheer, black abyss where freezing mountain winds screamed through narrow fissures of iron-red rock.

Sagiri led the squad along the upper crags, keeping his body pressed low against the frosted shale while his crimson eyes scanned the shadowed ravine below.

Behind him, Squad 25 moved in disciplined loose-stalking formation, using the jagged basalt boulders to break their silhouettes against the pale morning sky.

"Watch your footing along this shelf," Kiuga whispered, dropping into a low crouch while signaling Bukata to cover the northern ridge line.

"The frost here has formed over brittle shale, and if you slide, you will drop three hundred paces into the gorge before anyone can grab your collar."

Maita scoffed quietly as he stepped over a frozen crevasse, pulling his woolen collar tighter against the biting chill of the mountain draft.

"I survived four miles of garrison drainage filth," Maita muttered, adjusting his twin short-swords with a grimace, "so a patch of frozen gravel is not going to kill me."

"Keep whining and I will push you over the edge myself," Kaka rumbled, stepping past him with his heavy iron tower shield locked firmly against his back.

"Silence," Sagiri instructed in a low hiss, dropping to one knee as he placed his bare palm flat against the frozen stone shelf.

The bedrock beneath his fingers was cold as ice, yet beneath the surface frost, a faint rhythmic tremor pulsed upward through the dense granite core.

It was not the natural settling of mountain rock or the rush of subterranean water, but the steady mechanical vibration of heavy machinery turning deep underground.

"What do you feel down there?" Kiuga asked, creeping up beside Sagiri while pulling a charcoal parchment map from his leather chest pouch.

"The mountain is hollowed out," Sagiri said, feeling the subtle vibrations resonate against the ancient pulse of the Archive within his chest.

"There are massive hollow chambers beneath this cut, running at least three hundred paces deep into the solid granite foundation."

Zolinka crawled along the eastern ledge with his bronze-tipped probing rod, stopping where a thin line of white steam rose from a narrow crack in the rock.

He knelt beside the fissure, scraping away a layer of frost before waving Kiuga and Sagiri over with a quick, urgent motion of his hand.

"The snow is not sticking to this section of the ridge," Zolinka pointed out, tapping the dark basalt where the frost had completely melted away.

"The stone here is warm to the touch, and there is a faint mechanical draft pushing upward through the seams of the rock."

Kiuga leaned over the opening, his sharp nose twitching as he caught the faint, pungent stench of sulfur and burning chemical grease.

"That is unnatural heat," Kiuga noted, tracing the direction of the fissure as it angled downward toward the base of the canyon wall.

"They are routing their furnace exhaust through natural mountain cracks to prevent thick smoke plumes from giving away their position from the sky."

Bukata peered down from the higher overhang, resting his heavy recurve bow across his knees while pointing his gloved finger toward the canyon floor.

"Look at the dry wash at the bottom of the gorge," Bukata called down in a hushed voice, squinting through the shifting morning fog.

"The riverbed is choked with jagged boulders, but there are two distinct grooves pressed deep into the frozen mud along the eastern wall."

Zazarie and Ulekai held their positions at the rear bottleneck, their halberds braced against the stone while keeping their eyes glued to the northern approach.

"No patrols on our tail," Zazarie reported in a low murmur, "the wind is carrying our scent away from the high watchtowers."

Sagiri leaped down from the stone shelf, landing without a sound on a lower terrace before sliding down the scree toward the canyon floor.

Squad 25 followed his descent with practiced military precision, keeping five paces of spacing between each warrior to avoid scattering loose stones.

They reached the frozen floor of the ravine, gathering beneath the deep shadow of an overhanging cliff that blocked the pale winter light.

Kiuga dropped to one knee beside the frozen mud, brushing away powdered frost to reveal wide, parallel ruts stamped into the hardened shale.

"These tracks were made by iron-rimmed transport wagons," Kiuga analyzed, measuring the depth of the indentations with his leather gloved fingers.

"Whatever was loaded into those carriages carried immense weight, and the ruts lead straight toward that solid slab of granite ahead."

Kaka walked toward the sheer rock face, resting his calloused hand against the dark stone while inspecting the jagged seams along the base.

"There is no opening here," Kaka grunted, his heavy brow furrowing as he knocked his iron gauntlet against the solid mountain wall.

"A wall of stone does not bleed chemical grease," Sagiri replied, pointing toward a thin dark stain glistening along the lower rock joint.

"Look closer at the rock seams," Zolinka said, stepping forward with his pry bar and wedging the flattened bronze tip into a hair-thin seam.

He pulled back on the lever with steady pressure, causing a thin layer of stone-coated canvas and wooden mesh to peel away from the cliff face.

Behind the camouflage mesh lay the true subterranean threshold—a massive blast gate forged from four-inch cold-rolled iron embedded directly into the living granite.

The iron gate was coated in thick layers of dark, frost-resistant grease, sealed tight against the bedrock with heavy hydraulic pressure locks.

Thick iron pipes lagged in frozen mineral wool ran along the ceiling crevice, humming with stolen geothermal current that pulsed with an eerie green light.

"By the ancestors," Ulekai whispered in awe, stepping back as he looked up at the towering iron barrier buried within the mountain.

"How could anyone build a fortress of this scale out here without the regional garrisons noticing the construction?"

"Because the northern generals were looking at the roads," Kiuga answered with a sharp scoff, examining the intricate interlocking locking pins of the gate.

"They brought their materials through the abandoned mining tunnels beneath the western peaks, keeping everything buried beneath three hundred feet of rock."

Maita stepped close to the reinforced iron frame, running his fingers along a narrow viewing slit reinforced with thick lead-glass plating.

"The latch mechanism is locked from the inside," Maita reported, peering through the glass into the pitch-black corridor beyond the gate.

"I can smell cold grease, stale iron, and something that smells like rotting swamp water mixed with burning incense."

Sagiri closed his eyes and pushed his sensory perception through the tiny gaps around the hydraulic seals, sending his mind into the dark tunnel beyond.

The interior passage was wide enough for four heavy wagons to pass abreast, sloping downward at a steep angle into the bowels of the earth.

Deep within the subterranean complex, he could hear the faint hum of pressurized cryogenic vats and the heavy thrum of geothermal boilers.

Beneath the industrial hum, however, his senses caught a far more disturbing rhythm—hundreds of cold, irregular pulses echoing through the rock.

They were not the warm, lively heartbeats of living soldiers, but the sluggish, rhythmic thumps of bodies suspended in chemical fluid.

'Sir Black is mass-producing the Soulless down there,' Sagiri realized, his jaw clenching as cold fury settled into his chest.

Kaka unstrapped his heavy war axes from his back, letting their steel heads rest against his knees as he looked at the blast gate.

"You cannot batter this door down without twenty men and an iron ram," Kaka stated plainly, testing the rigidity of the reinforced iron hinges.

"A locked door only proves that whatever is hiding inside is terrified of what is walking outside," Kaka added in his low, stubborn rumble.

"We do not need to batter it down," Kiuga replied with a cunning smirk, pointing up toward the auxiliary ventilation shafts running above the lintel.

"Every underground stronghold needs air to feed its furnaces, and wherever air flows into the mountain, a squad can slip inside."

Sagiri stepped back from the blast gate, turning his gaze toward his companions as the cold wind whipped their dark field cloaks around them.

"We have found the stronghold," Sagiri said, his voice quiet and deadly serious as he met the eyes of every warrior in Squad 25.

"Now we climb back to the ridge, map out every entry point, and draft a plan to tear this place apart from the inside."

Chapter 393: THE INFILTRATION PLAN

The freezing mountain wind howled across the high overhang, driving swirls of powdery white snow against the jagged black basalt rock.

Squad 25 gathered inside a shallow cave two hundred paces above the canyon floor, using the natural stone roof to shelter their reconnaissance map.

Kiuga knelt over a flat granite slab, pinning the corners of his parchment down with four heavy iron throwing daggers to keep it from flapping.

He dipped a charred wooden stick into a tin of lamp soot, sketching the layered geometry of the Bleeding Gorge in sharp, decisive strokes.

"Sagiri's sensory pulse gave us the depth," Kiuga began, tapping the parchment where he had outlined three concentric subterranean circles.

"The complex has at least four subterranean tiers, hollowed out beneath the bedrock and anchored directly into the deep geothermal vents."

Kaka sat on an upturned boulder with a whetstone in hand, drawing the coarse stone across the steel bevel of his heavy war axe.

The rhythmic rasp of steel on stone echoed through the small cave, setting a grim, measured cadence for the squad.

"A facility built inside living stone has only two weaknesses," Kaka rumbled, not lifting his eyes from the glittering edge of his blade.

"It needs air to keep its workers breathing, and it needs a way to dump its waste heat before the rock boils."

"Look at the big brute showing off his tactical education," Kiuga laughed, tapping the charcoal stick against the upper tier of his diagram.

"Kaka is right for once in his life, and that brings us to the three intake chimneys Zolinka scouted along the northern crag."

Maita leaned against the cavern wall, adjusting the leather scabbards of his twin short-swords while shaking frozen gravel from his boots.

"Those intake chimneys are two feet wide at best," Maita pointed out, squinting at the rough dimensions sketched on the parchment.

"Kaka's shoulders are broader than a mountain ox, and if he gets wedged in the flue, we will be stuck in a chimney with a giant cork."

"If I get stuck," Kaka said in a low, deadpan growl, "I will pull the chimney down with my bare hands and drop the mountain on you."

"Nobody is getting stuck in the flue," Sagiri intervened with a faint smirk, crouching beside Kiuga to inspect the mapped conduit lines.

"We cannot storm the main blast gate directly," Sagiri continued, tracing the heavy iron line representing the four-inch reinforced barrier.

"The hydraulic seals are locked from within, and triggering a frontal breach will cause them to purge the facility before we reach the lower levels."

Kiuga nodded in agreement, drawing three distinct arrows in dark soot that converged on the lower subterranean core.

"Which is why we are dividing our squad into three synchronized strike units," Kiuga announced, looking up to meet the eyes of every warrior.

"Team One will be our perimeter anchor, commanded by Bukata with Zazarie and Ulekai holding the high rim of the gorge."

Bukata adjusted the string of his heavy recurve bow, nodding slowly as he checked the tension on his quiver straps.

"We will secure the upper chimney rim," Bukata confirmed, "and lay iron tripwires and deadfall traps across the scree."

"If any northern garrison scout or border patrol approaches this ridge, we will silence them before they can fire a warning flare."

"Your secondary job is extraction," Kiuga added, pointing his charcoal stick toward the dry riverbed at the base of the canyon.

"Once we breach the core, you keep the canyon floor clear so we have an open corridor when we drag whatever is down there into the daylight."

Zazarie and Ulekai checked the locking pins of their heavy halberds, acknowledging the order with sharp, disciplined nods.

"What about the secondary power turbines?" Zolinka asked, leaning over Kiuga's shoulder with his bronze-tipped probing tools.

"The green bio-energy hum Sagiri felt comes from the geothermal converters on sub-level two," Zolinka explained, tapping the middle tier.

"If those converters keep running, every security grate, alarm bell, and internal blast gate in the facility will remain fully powered."

"That brings us to Team Two," Kiuga said, a sharp, predatory grin spreading across his face as he tapped his own chest.

"Myself, Maita, and Zolinka will drop through the secondary ventilation shaft directly into the sub-level two maintenance galleries."

"Zolinka will pick the conduit junction locks," Kiuga continued, "while Maita and I eliminate the guards before they can sound an alert."

"Once we sever the primary geothermal conduits, the entire complex will lose its hydraulic locks and plunge into total darkness."

Maita cracked his knuckles with a satisfied grin, his earlier complaints vanishing as his fingers tightened around his sword hilts.

"Cutting power lines in the dark is my specialty," Maita said, "and I promise to leave their generator room in a hundred pieces."

"Which leaves Team Three," Kiuga concluded, his dark eyes shifting toward Sagiri and the silent northern titan sitting beside him.

"Sagiri and Kaka," Kiuga said, tapping the deepest subterranean circle marked at the very bottom of the mountain foundation.

"While Team Two disables the power, you two drop through the primary heavy cargo shaft and hit the central containment floor."

"That is where the chemical vats are located," Sagiri noted, his jaw tightening as he remembered the cold, unnatural heartbeats.

"And that is where Sir Black will be holding Rika if she is still alive inside that mountain," Sagiri added in a hardened tone.

Kaka slid his whetstone back into his belt pouch, testing the razor-sharp edge of his axe against the rough leather of his thumb.

"Two men in the deep core is enough," Kaka rumbled, rising to his full towering height as his iron armor clanked softly in the cave.

"Sagiri breaks the locks with Nokai, and I will crush anything wearing a grey coat that steps between us and the cages."

"The timing must be exact," Kiuga warned, raising three fingers to emphasize the sequence of their synchronized assault.

"Team One secures the rim at dusk; Team Two drops through the flue and severs the turbine power ten minutes later."

"The moment the lights die and the hydraulic pressure drops, Team Three breaches the containment level and begins the sweep."

Sagiri stood up from the stone slab, feeling the blood pulsing steadily through his veins as the Archive hummed beneath his ribs.

He looked around the small cavern, taking in the calm, resolute expressions of the seven young men who had followed him into the wild.

They were no longer mere fourth-year cadets bickering in the Galka training arenas or running penalty sprints beneath the hot sun.

They were seasoned warriors of Squad 25, forged through blood, poison, and siege, ready to plunge into the darkest pit in the realm together.

"Check your weapon straps, tighten your boots, and double-check your grappling lines," Sagiri ordered, his voice echoing with quiet authority.

"We have two hours until the sun drops behind the western ridge," Sagiri said, looking out toward the darkening sky above the gorge.

"Eat your dried rations, stay warm, and prepare yourselves for the breach."

Kiuga rolled up the soot-stained parchment, securing it inside his waterproof leather cylinder with a sharp click of the brass cap.

"Squad 25 moves as one," Kiuga said with a wink, tossing a piece of dried meat to Kaka, who caught it cleanly in his gauntlet.

"Don't choke on your food, Kaka," Kiuga teased, "we need your heavy arms in one piece when the doors blow open."

"Keep talking, Kiuga," Kaka replied, biting into the meat with a crunch, "and I will use your head to wedge the lift shaft open."

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Chapter 394: SUB-LEVEL BREACH

The squad stayed hidden as they watched the last crimson sliver of sunset dissolve behind the western jagged peaks, plunging the Bleeding Gorge into freezing, impenetrable darkness.

High along the canyon rim, mountain winds whistled across the knife-edge rocks, carrying drafts of frost. Bukata crouched near the cliff's crumbling lip, anchoring three braided silk rappel lines around a deep basalt spur before testing the tension with two firm jerks of his gloved hands.

"The lines are set," Bukata whispered, signaling Zazarie and Ulekai to take up defensive watch positions among the loose scree. "Team Two has five minutes to reach the generator gallery before the lower shift change begins. Keep your eyes on the gorge floor."

Zazarie and Ulekai nodded in unison, dropping into the rock shadows with their heavy recurve bows resting across their knees.

High above the subterranean facility, the mountain stillness felt brittle, stretched tight like a bowstring ready to snap at the slightest mistake.

Kiuga adjusted his leather goggles, sliding through the narrow bronze grating of the secondary intake chimney with the silent grace of a hunting snake.

Maita and Zolinka followed immediately behind him, their bodies slipping through the vertical shaft as their soft-soled boots gripped the metal rivets.

They moved in perfect rhythm, descending into the dark belly of the stronghold without dislodging a single pebble into the flues below.

It almost felt like they were back in Galka Academy in another outer pentagon exercise.

On the eastern ledge, Sagiri and Kaka took their positions above the central cargo flue, clipping heavy steel carabiners to the main descent line.

"Ten seconds," Sagiri whispered, his right eye glowing with a faint crimson hue beneath his forehead wrap as he monitored Kiuga's descent through the thermal conduits.

Three hundred feet below within the rock, Kiuga dropped onto the catwalk of sub-level two, drawing his curved short-blade in the same fluid motion. The air inside the gallery was thick with sulfur and superheated steam from the converter turbines.

Two grey-coated technicians turned toward the noise, but Maita vaulted over the railing, striking both men across their throats with the flats of his twin blades before they could cry out.

Zolinka sprinted to the central geothermal console, driving his bronze pry rod directly into the master pressure regulator.

"Sever the primary steam bypass!" Kiuga ordered, leaping onto the elevated platform and driving his dagger into the main junction core.

A violent shower of bright orange sparks erupted across the gallery, followed by the deafening hiss of depressurizing hydraulic fluid. The green chemical lamps illuminating the corridors flickered violently three times before dying completely, plunging the entire subterranean facility into absolute darkness as the ventilation fans ground to a halt.

High above, Sagiri and Kaka kicked off the canyon wall, plummeting through the central cargo flue before arresting their descent thirty paces above the floor. Sagiri severed their descent cables with a single flick of Nokai, landing on the cold steel grating of sub-level three without making a sound.

Kaka landed beside him with the heavy, solid thud of an iron anvil, bringing his towering tower shield up into a locked guard stance as the floorplates vibrated under his weight.

Emergency red runes sputtered to life along the reinforced iron bulkheads, casting long, bloody shadows across the wide transport corridor.

Before the echoes of the power outage could settle, a dozen silent figures emerged from the gloom at the far end of the hallway. They wore long, charcoal-grey coats reinforced with steel scales, their faces completely concealed behind smooth iron masks without eye slits.

"Grey Enforcers," Sagiri warned in a low hiss, feeling the total absence of emotional warmth radiating from the advancing squad. "They do not feel fear, pain, or hesitation."

Sagiri shifted his grip on Nokai as ink-black markings crept along his neck, awakening the latent resonance within his blood.

The enforcers charged in eerie, synchronized silence, thrusting heavy three-pronged mechanical spears designed to pin targets against the walls.

Kaka roared a fierce northern battle cry, stepping forward to meet the charge with the full kinetic weight of his massive frame. His iron tower shield slammed into the lead spearman, shattering the bronze shaft and launching the armored warrior ten paces down the corridor.

"Empty shells or not," Kaka rumbled, swinging his broad-headed war axe in a devastating horizontal arc, "their bones break just the same!"

The heavy steel blade cleaved through two breastplates with bone-splintering force, sending both enforcers crashing against the stone wall.

Sagiri moved beneath the reach of an incoming trident, pivoting on his left heel as four black blades separated from Nokai's spine. The flying blades spun through the dim red emergency light, slicing cleanly through weapon straps and puncturing the hydraulic nerve regulators in their gauntlets.

Disarmed and off-balance, the remaining four enforcers collapsed onto the grated flooring, neutralized before they could sound a secondary horn.

"The corridor is clear," Sagiri announced, retrieving the floating blades back into the central spine of Nokai with a soft metallic click.

Kiuga, Maita, and Zolinka sprinted down the emergency stairwell, their boots clattering against the iron steps as they regrouped with Team Three.

"Sub-level two generators are completely dead," Kiuga reported, wiping a streak of dark grease from his cheek with a satisfied smirk. "Every electronic lock from here to the central containment floor has fallen into manual bypass mode."

Zolinka stepped up to the reinforced bronze door leading into the master laboratory, wedging his pry tool into the manual release latch. With a heavy mechanical groan, the thick double doors slid apart, revealing a cavernous chamber lined with dozens of glowing glass cylinders.

Sagiri stepped into the laboratory, his crimson gaze sweeping across rows of cylindrical cryogenic tanks filled with bubbling green chemical fluid. Inside each frosted glass tube hung the silhouette of a human subject, suspended in unnatural stasis with black ink runes branded into their flesh.

"Ancestors preserve us," Maita muttered under his breath, his arrogant smirk fading as he stared at the horrors lining the room. "They are growing an army of soulless soldiers down here. Hundreds of them, stripped of their will and turned into flesh puppets."

Sagiri walked toward a central iron console illuminated by a solitary red lantern, where a heavy leather logbook lay open upon the desk. He brushed his fingers across the parchment, reading the dark ink entries inscribed with the personal seal of Sir Black.

Subject 001

Subject possesses pure dust-rose irises and primordial void resonance, immune to mental probing and psychic tracking.

Subject has undergone cryogenic thermal conditioning and Black Rot neural binding to serve as the ultimate anti-Keeper weapon.

Designation: The Apex Soulless - Kiana.

'Kiana,' Sagiri thought, his heart tightening with profound sorrow as he read the cold, clinical documentation of a stolen life. 'She was the girl at the examination headquarters, no doubt.'

"Sagiri, look at the lower tier. Let us all search this level. You are more equipped to move alone," Kiuga called out from the observation railing, pointing down toward the deepest floor of the complex where massive hydraulic bulkheads sealed the pit.

Before Sagiri could reply, a violent shockwave ripped through the bedrock beneath their feet, nearly throwing the entire squad off balance.

The reinforced steel grating groaned under massive tectonic pressure as the solid granite walls cracked from the floor to the ceiling.

From the black depths of the primary containment vault below, a terrifying, earth-shattering roar tore through the subterranean complex.

It was not the sound of a machine or a mortal man, but the deafening, bloodcurdling fury of a primordial apex beast unleashed in madness.

Kaka planted his boots firmly against the shaking floor, his face hardening as he locked his heavy shield in front of the squad.

"Whatever is locked inside that vault," Kiuga warned, his voice deep and grim against the vibrating stone, "is larger than a mountain titan."

Sagiri drew Nokai to its full length, his twin crimson eyes burning through the shadows as heavy blast gates below began to buckle and tear open under violent blows.

Nokai hummed in his hand, ready to be released if need be. The archive hummed with intent, and sagiri's eyes glowed even more crimson.

"Get into combat formation," Sagiri commanded, feeling the savage beast aura rising from the abyss. "The real battle begins now!"

The squad fell into tight formations instantly, blades drawn in front of them. They had grown even more agile since the last time sagiri had seen them.

He had grown stronger. Yet they still wanted to keep ties with him even when he was actively attacking their land. Even Kaka, most of all. The younger version of him could have tried to kill him for sure.

Chapter 395: THE BEAST UNLEASHED

The four-inch reinforced iron blast doors at the far end of the lower gallery groaned under the weight of catastrophic internal impacts.

Deep dents bulged outward through the heavy steel plating, each successive blow warping the metal as red-hot rivets popped from the granite ceiling and clattered loudly across the wet floorplates.

Squad 25 immediately dropped into a tight hexagonal defensive formation, their blades drawn and glistening under the red runes while their boots braced against the violently vibrating floor.

"Whatever is behind that gate has the physical strength of a mountain titan," Kaka warned, locking his heavy tower shield into the steel grating as his jaw set in iron resolve.

"Just like you," Kiuga whispered loudly, and Kaka grunted in disapproval

With an ear-splitting shriek of tearing metal, the massive hinges snapped, sending the two-ton iron door flying fifty paces across the chamber. The door crashed violently into a row of cryogenic tanks, shattering the reinforced glass and spilling hundreds of gallons of bubbling green chemical fluid across the stone floor.

Through the rising white steam and freezing chemical vapor, a tall, imposing figure stepped into the red emergency light of the corridor. He wore the torn remnants of an imperial ceremonial robe of white and gold, his broad chest bare and marked with intricate tribal scars. A thick collar of black iron was fused directly into the base of his skull, driving five pulsing bio-neural needles deep into his spinal column.

Pitch-black beast aura swirled violently around his muscular frame, distorting the air like shimmering heat waves rising from a scorched summer desert. When he lifted his head, his eyes burned with vertical, slit-pupil amber irises that radiated pure, unadulterated predator madness.

"Ancestors above," Kiuga gasped, stepping back a half-pace while his fingers tightened firmly around the leather grip of his curved blade. "That is Supreme Mandra Taziraka, the sovereign master of the High Council and ruler of Tagayia!"

"His consciousness has been completely overridden," Sagiri analyzed, his crimson eyes tracking the dark corruption pulsing through the neural collar. "Sir Black bound him with dark bio-neural seals, trapping his mind inside an induced nightmare to unleash the primal Art of the Beast."

The Mandra let out a guttural, bone-chilling roar that rattled the teeth in their jaws, vibrating directly through the solid bedrock beneath them. In the next instant, the air warped violently around the imperial master as he vanished from their sight, bending local time through predator dilation.

Sagiri stepped forward without hesitation, planting his boots firmly into the steel grating as he raised the dark flat of Nokai to meet the charge. The Mandra's black-clad fist crashed into Nokai with the force of an avalanche, unleashing an explosive shockwave that parted the flooded floor in all directions.

Sagiri did not budge an inch, his internal Archive pulsing with cold equilibrium as he absorbed the titanic kinetic impact through his bones. Before the echoes of the collision could settle, the Mandra pivoted with feral agility, driving a heavy roundhouse kick directly toward Kaka's flank.

Sagiri flicked two floating black blades of Nokai into the trajectory, intercepting the blow and dispersing half its kinetic momentum before it connected. Even with the force halved, the impact slammed into Kaka's tower shield with a thunderous clang, driving the northern warrior two paces backward across the shale.

"He hits like an iron battering ram!" Kaka grunted, shaking the numbness from his forearms as he reset his locked defensive posture.

Maita and Zolinka flanked the charging sovereign from opposite sides, attempting to loop weighted steel capture cords around his thighs to bind his movement. The Mandra swept his left arm outward with a ferocious burst of compressed wind, launching both warriors across the room into an iron support pillar.

Maita rolled across the floor with a painful gasp, coughing up a spatter of blood before scrambling back onto his feet with drawn daggers. "His speed is unnatural," Maita cursed, wiping his bloody chin. "I could not even see his shoulder move before the strike landed!"

"That is the primordial Art of the Beast," Kiuga yelled, firing three whistling iron darts toward the Mandra's knees to slow his advance. "He perceives the world in slowed time, predicting every muscle twitch before we can even begin to complete our movements!"

The Mandra swatted the steel darts out of the air with his bare hand, crushing the hardened metal into twisted scrap within his palm. He locked his burning amber gaze onto Sagiri, sensing the ancient, resonant authority of the Living Memory pulsing within the young Keeper.

With a deafening roar, the Mandra launched himself across the flooded laboratory, unleashing a relentless tempest of ferocious fist strikes. Sagiri moved with effortless grace, weaving his head and shoulders by mere fractions of an inch as the blistering punches tore through the air.

Every savage strike whistled past his cheeks, shattering the iron consoles and stone pillars behind him into clouds of jagged shrapnel. Four black blades of Nokai circled Sagiri's body like a living vortex of dark steel, parrying each crushing blow with surgical precision.

'If I unleash the Archive or strike him with full force, I will shatter his ribcage and kill him on the spot,' Sagiri thought grimly. 'He is the sovereign ruler of Tagayia and an innocent victim of Sir Black's treason; I have to keep him alive and sever the seal cleanly.'

Sagiri leaped backward onto the elevated rim of a chemical vat, his twin crimson eyes narrowing as he locked onto the pulsing black collar.

"Kiuga, Kaka, listen to my command!" Sagiri shouted, his voice ringing with absolute sovereign authority across the ruined hall. "We are not here to destroy the Supreme Mandra; we are here to wake him from this nightmare before the poison claims his mind!"

"We need a three-second window to immobilize his upper torso," Sagiri explained, pointing Nokai toward the dark needles behind Taziraka's skull. "If I can strike the central neural node with the tip of Nokai, I can shatter the corruption without harming a single hair on his head!"

Kiuga's sharp eyes flicked across the damaged room, quickly calculating the angles of the remaining support pillars and heavy iron chains hanging from the ceiling rafters.

"Kaka takes the front with his shield to lock his charge," Kiuga barked, drawing two heavy grappling cables from his combat belt. "Maita, Zolinka, and I will drop the overhead cargo chains to bind his arms for three heartbeats while Sagiri makes the precision strike!"

Maita and Zolinka nodded with grim determination, scrambling up the maintenance ladders toward the winch controls as cold determination replaced their earlier shock.

Kaka slammed his war axe against the face of his tower shield, stepping directly into the center of the flooded chamber with an unyielding grin.

"Come then, Supreme Mandra!" Kaka challenged, his voice booming across the subterranean hall like northern thunder. "Show a son of the northern clans what the strongest warrior in Tagayia can do before we drag you back to your senses!"

The Mandra lowered his center of gravity, his amber irises narrowing to razor-thin slits as the dark beast aura erupted in a towering black vortex. The sheer pressure of his release blew the surrounding water into a mist of vapor, cracking the stone floor under his bare feet.

Sagiri crouched along the narrow lip of the vat, his hand gripping the hilt of Nokai as the silver-black light of the Living Memory gathered at the blade's razor tip.

He watched the coiled muscles along Taziraka's broad back bunch with terrifying, feral power, timing his breath with the impending kinetic eruption.

In the next heartbeat, the imperial sovereign lunged forward with blinding, catastrophic velocity, aiming his devastating fist directly at Kaka's iron shield as Squad 25 braced for the ultimate clash of wills.