

THE LAST KEEPER

#Chapter 1: THE NIGHT OF THE SILENT SAND - Read THE LAST KEEPER Chapter 1: THE NIGHT OF THE SILENT SAND

Chapter 1: Chapter 1: THE NIGHT OF THE SILENT SAND

The night had started with the silent hum of the desert sand. It loved its inhabitants and it whispered to them. However, the sand had gotten restless as the day went by. Perhaps it was because the first daughter of the desert was about to bring life into the world. The clan sand whisperers hummed to the sand to calm it and it calmed down for a while, perhaps the silence of an impending storm. The N'folu clan sat in the loins of the land of N'garu, hidden from the world. It was the smallest in number yet the oldest of the tribes of the south.

N'garu, also known as "The Land of Four Winds." is a home to the ancient echo archives and echo protectors. They protected the echo through all generations. It is their duty.

Perhaps they knew what awaited them since nothing was hidden from their eyes or their touch. That night the sadness of the sand could be heard as it wailed. The tribe council knew the United Tribes were closing in on the last surviving Archive enclave. The whisper of the sand had been carried by the wind. They didn't know why the sudden attack, but they knew they couldn't let them have the echo. The death soldiers of the three tribes gathered to aid the call.

"I can feel movement in through the sand, an enemy." The daughter of the sand glowed protectively her eyes going black making those around her shudder with fear. Her name is Nathari'Harina, Keeper of the Living Memory. With it also came great power and responsibility. The black in her eyes however disappeared a second later when another wave of labour pain hit her making her topple with pain.

"Nathari'Harina, as the echo archives' bearer and protector, if you let your power spiral out of control, you will kill the child" the middle aged midwife, Inzari'Yavinka warned her. She had a lot of experience bringing babies into this world and she had never lost a single child.

"Cowards attacking when I'm weak!" she sneered with disgust, shaking with rage.

Only two pregnant N'folu women in labour remained in the innermost part of the echo holder, as all the other clan members disappeared into the desert to create a barrier to protect their bearer. They might have been the least battle oriented tribes yet as they scattered into their dessert their eyes black almost swallowing the night, they knew what had to be done. They sat scattered in the desert in thirteen formations each led by a

clan elder of all the thirteen clans of N'folu. The patterns on their bodies moved to their hands. Their connection and whispers danced in the sand before then in unison. They threw their capes back to expose their shaved heads. They touched the crowns of their heads as a promise before binding their lifeforce to strengthen the echo. A final clap of their hands coming together marked the final step of the ritual to use their life force to protect their keeper and her unborn child. However long it took.

Inside the echo holder, the first mother cried as she finally pushed out her baby. The baby did not cry however, she was dead. Inzari'Yavinka gasped. That was the first dead baby she had delivered. "This is a bad omen" she whispered. The mother died shortly after, stricken with grief. Inzari'Yavinka shook her head but she didn't stop to grieve as she got to work to help Nathari deliver her baby. It was difficult and the baby was breached.

"Something is wrong outside." Nathari growled again in both pain and panic. She could feel the lifeforce of her tribe fading and she didn't dare to think of the worst case scenario. As her labour got intense she could also taste the danger move even closer and she could no longer feel the lifeforce of half her clan. Even in her weakened state she could see as thousands of flaming spears were launched at the echo holder.

One broke through the echo hall as her labour intensified and she pushed with all her might with the help of Inzari'Yavinka who was now sweating after pushing the child into a good position. When the child's head showed the archive responded with a glow that was so intense to the eye of anyone who saw it.

"That's strange, " Inzari'Yavinka gasped. Nathari laughed with joy as she watched the echo respond to her child. "You are the next keeper" she whispered in excitement before pushing again with all her might finally dispelling the child from her loins. The archive responded again much more violently, it trembled with power and its wall cracked with the weight of visions of the future. Echoes screamed warnings of the future, the visions formed into markings disappearing into Nathari's veins. She gasped with all the visions she saw. Her eyes turned black before a tear in the form of blood flowed down her face.

"I'm sorry my child" she whispered, shutting her eyes for a second. "I know what to do." she whispered to the echo. As those words came out of her mouth the memory stone shattered like glass. The desert that had been silent since the start of the chaos suddenly as if to rant its rage, it rose in a spiraling storm circling around the echo.

The enemy who had been holding back scared to approach, suddenly watching the events unfolding with horror took it as an attack launched at then came the command.

"Kill them all!" the general ordered and they charged forward in hundreds killing the N'folu clan members who hadn't already collapsed after being drained of their life force. Nathari could not only hear but see what was happening close by, as the new echo memories rushed into her head. She watched her tribe get slaughtered one by one and

with one last cry she fell to her knee with the child in her hand. She was still bleeding heavily and she didn't need to cut herself for the ritual; that followed.

"If you do that you will die!" Inzari'Yavinka warned when she saw what was about to happen.

"I have to." she said, eyes going black. Inzari'Yavinka knew deep down what had to be done. So with one last resolve she said.

"Use my lifeforce then, you are weak from childbirth" she tore her wrist and fell on her knees too in front of Nathira. They could hear the hundreds of feet rush into the outer hall and it was only a matter of minutes before they caught up with them. Nathira bit her hand and touched her finger to her child's mouth, then drew a symbol on her forehead and another on the ground, summoning the echo one last time . She smiled lovingly one last time before slapping her hands together with Inzari'Yavinka.

"As the keeper to protect you I bind you to this child. The echo trembled one time starting to become one with the child. Inzari'Yavinka collapsed first, her life force exhausted. She was old after all and too weak to handle the aftermath of the forbidden ritual they had just committed.

Nathira was no better, she had lost a lot of blood and she was standing at the jaws of death. She kissed her child one last time and apologized for not living longer to see him grow older. With her last breath Nathira summoned her guard, a royal Shadow guardian appointed to her at birth, his name Koru'Zalanko. She whispered a dying command directly to his head.

"Hide him. The echo must survive." He was her last line, called only in dire situations upon the command he arose from the loins of the desert moving amidst a blur. His master needed him and the command she had issued he could keep to his death.

The guardian took the newborn, wrapped in barely any clothes, and fled through the collapsing hall. His ability to move fast and disappear was the major reason he was her shadow guardian. Whenever she was he could appear if summoned. As the northern troops broke the final seal, Nathari used her last breath to trigger the Archive Implosion, burying the hall under a mile of sand. Every enemy inside died.

Koru'Zalanko smuggled the baby northward, he believed that the most dangerous place is safest. Hiding him in plain sight was his only chance of survival. Keeping the child alive was the command from his master he had to obey. He also knew no southern settlement was safe. He carried the child through a storm so violent it erased all tracks of the desert itself protecting the infant. He called it, THE NIGHT OF SILENT SAND, the night when the desert swallowed an army and delivered a child.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2: THE PROPHECY

"Do you think someone like him really exists and that he will return?" the younger scholar of the Fiyandu enlightened clan asked the older scholar, who was his uncle. "It has been years, and the prophecy hasn't changed." He continued looking at the foreign language between the crystals.

"The child of memory will return.

He will hold the power of nations in his skin.

He will break the one who broke the South."

"He doesn't exist," the older scholar said with finality. "Let's not talk about this anymore." He said, moving to the other side of the hall. "But can you imagine the possibility of someone that powerful existing?" The youth followed behind him. The older scholar shook his head at his naivety. He might have pampered his nephew so much as to let him into the inner hall.

"I did not allow you to join the most enlightened so you can cause trouble for me, don't ask things you are not qualified to know." Avandi finally snapped. He had picked Tisiki because he was smart and he was beginning to think the boy was not smart at all.

"I know I know, I see nothing and hear nothing," he answered, skipping out of the inner hall of astronomy.

Deep in the lower east of Tagayia, near the border in a small village, a young youth was lying behind a bush. His breath was held as he listened to the heartbeat of the creature. His house is at the outskirts of town, far from the closest village. He listened to every breath of the wind, every burrow of the rodents, and the song of the birds. This had become his routine as long as he could remember. At first, he couldn't hear them, but when he turned ten, he could hear every breath of every creature. When he asked his mother. She had told him it was a sign of growth. He should have believed her, as every child believed their mother, but he knew his mother had lied to him. He didn't have the heart to call her out, even so.

He was twelve now, and he could hear every creature's song. He had learned to filter out the voices he didn't care for and focus on the ones he cared for. He could hear the chirping of the clutch of a rabbit, and his lips behind the face covering lifted in a smile. A sleeping rabbit? He was lucky. It was a mile away. He jumped from his spot on the ground and took off in a run. He moved lightly so as not to make any sound. He jumped over roots and swung over a branch, letting himself stay upside down for a while before letting himself fall. A hunt did not have to be fast and precise. It could also be fun and stealthy. He was a quiet child, and he had known he was different from his peers long ago. he now preferred to play alone.

He had just landed silently when he felt a new presence in his turf. Several footsteps were moving in on his position. The sand under him vibrated as if sensing the intruders, too. Suddenly, he saw echo images around the strangers. The images were intense, making him lose his balance. He fell to his knees, losing his advantage. When he looked up again, a burly man was standing in front of him dressed in a scout uniform. The scouts hadn't just happened to stumble upon the village. A rumour had spread about a child with strange senses living on the outskirts of the Wuzi village."

The leader was the burly man, clearly from the Zume clan by his horned mask that sat above his nose and the tail curve tattoo running down the forearms. To his left was a short man bearing the tattoo of jagged lines across the jaw and shoulder known to the Barku tribe. To his right was another big man. He was tall as he was fat with a tattoo of a curved horn on the left pectoral of his chest, known to the korma tribe. An even smaller woman with a detached expression was sitting on a protruding root, her round eyes staring into space. She bore a tattoo of twin horizontal eye stripes under her eyes. Her weapon, which was coiled around her arms, was engraved with a totem of a desert falcon known to the Nfari tribe. Standing behind her as if to guard her was a wide-eyed boy looking to have just turned sixteen, but with the body of an eleven-year-old. His tattoo is a jawbone pattern around the mouth. He was from the leading clan Haku of the Shoku tribe of the north.

His senses screamed when he regarded each one of them. The word enemy was clear even though he had never met them. The scout from the Zume tribe moved forward, and the youth instinctively moved back.

"Hey, don't be scared, I'm looking for a boy with markings on his body. Care to take off your mask and coverings so I can check?" His question sounded like a polite request, but it was more of a command. He instinctively activated the memory echo. He didn't know what it was, however, but the gore images almost brought him to his knees. A strange man was bathed in the blood of children and women from a clan. A place he felt close to was on fire, and a commander was yelling for the other scouts dressed in northern uniforms. In his arms, he held a drawing of the markings on his body, and he was labelled as a "threat".

"Why am I a threat?" he wondered out loud. The white in his eyes turned black.

"Something is wrong, Talegu!" The short man from the Barku tribe yelled to the leader, forcing everyone to get into a defensive formation.

Telugu moved fast, trying to capture the boy, but he didn't even get to move before the ground under him shifted, making him fall forward. He had activated sand resonance without realizing it. All he could understand was, the men in front of him were enemies. The others tried to move to aid their leader, but just like him, the ground beneath their feet moved violently, making them unable to charge.

"Sagiri, stop!" A familiar voice broke through his trance. It radiated only warmth like it always had. His eyes returned to their normal colour. Rusa and Bakuru, his mother and father, were running to him from a distance. The middle-aged village doctor and her husband, Bakuru, rushed to their child. Rusa pulled him into a warm embrace, giving the intruders a wary smile.

"Please forgive my boy, he is simple-minded and loves to throw simple pranks. He meant no harm at all," she lied, and Sagiri could feel it. He could also feel his anger directed at strangers burning like hot charcoal. The scouts didn't argue with her as they turned around and left in a hurry, clearly not believing a word she said. They were not whatsoever convinced that what they had experienced was a prank. Something was amiss with the boy.

That night, after Sagiri retired to his sleeping chamber, Rusa cried. She had failed to protect him, and she didn't know how long she could keep him hidden and protected.

"They are going to take him, Bakuru. We failed to protect him, we have broken our promise." She wailed.

Bakuru gripped his old spear, trembling. He was no longer as strong as he used to be. His spear had long rusted because he swore he could never use it again after the dreadful night years ago. Only three sentences remained true in their heart.

They know.

The North will come back for him.

Sooner or later.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3: THE FESTIVAL

From the raised stone ledge overlooking the festival grounds, Sagiri stood alone. Exactly where he preferred to be. He was wrapped in a shadow black, long, layered cloak that clung to his form like smoke trapped in fabric. The heavy folds fell to his ankles, drifting silently behind him as though stirred by an unseen wind. Its surface is deep black, drinking in the moonlight instead of reflecting it. Across his shoulders lay an additional layer of a high-necked cloth that rose to cover the lower half of his face. It conceals his jaw and mouth completely, leaving only his eyes visible, sharp, restless, and unsettlingly bright.

His hair and head are hidden beneath a close-fitted, night-absorbing balaclava hooded cloak, crafted from tightly woven fibers that stretch smoothly across his skull. It shapes to him perfectly, revealing no stray locks, no exposed skin. Only the thin slits for his eyes break the darkness of his appearance. His hands are gloved in veil-gloved, soft but strong, and marked with faint drawings from her mother's favorite flower. They flicker when exposed to light.

At his waist hangs his weapon small folding shadow-blade, forged from an ancient metal. When dormant, it shrinks into a compact shard no larger than a river stone, dark and dull. But when summoned, it unfurls in a ripple of black steel lengthening, sharpening, humming with stored power until it becomes a full weapon capable of cutting through spirit and matter alike. He hadn't known it could lengthen, and it had surprised him the first time. It, however, never lengthened again, and he did not know how to use it. To the crowd below, he would look like nothing more than a tall silhouette carved from the night itself.

Below him, the Aru'Maya festival blazed to life.

(Aru means: new, Maya means: moon)

'The Moon Festival is held during the appearance of the new moon. It is said to be the night when ancestors, spirits, and all living tribes breathe as one. Aru 'Maya is the one night when all tribes of the state of the united tribes of Tagayia, all ages, and all walks of life come together to celebrate unity, destiny, and the blessings of the Ancients. They come together to celebrate the first man to settle in the lands of Tasaka. His name is Taliga. They were once separated, but they believe it is his wish for them to be united once again. It is a night when all of Tagayia comes together to heal old grudges, to strengthen the unity of the united tribes, bless newborns, and seal the promises made during the festival

They lit big fires and danced till morning, and when all the woods dissolved to ash, Aru'Maya ended.

Thousands of people moved as one, their footsteps sparking lines of light across the earth. The glowing artificial Vines curled through the air like magic strings, dipping low concessionary from the wind to brush the heads of laughing children. Drums thundered, echoing up the cliff face.

First, the Shor'vak drum (***Shor' means: first and Vak means: wake***)

its sound echoes first. Its drummers are skilled and energetic, sending their echoes across the valleys. It signifies the start of the celebration, followed by the Tah'runi drum (***Tah' means: second and Runi means: call***), each beat of the ancient drum releases floating artificial silver rings when beat, which children chase. It is the younger kids' favorite drum because they think it's made from magic. Then the third drum and final drum, the Vor'maka drum sounds (***Vol' means: third and Maka means: invitation***), it is the most powerful of the three. It makes the ground vibrate with its beat and the stomps of the dancers. The dance that awakens the sky, each beat pushing against his chest like a tide. The three festival drums finally take on a festive rhythm, sounding as one.

"Aru'na! (***Aru: means Light and Na: rise!***) The youths shouted with myrrh.

As the festival began, hundreds of youths rushed into the Great Circle to perform the Ritu'Kana: *a dance of a thousand stumps*. Drums thundered, shaking the very foundation of the earth. Growing patterns glowed beneath their feet, a reflection of the fire and their anklets. Their footsteps left trails of light behind, and their laughter was joyful. Young men wore flare ribbons attached to their wrists that burst into sparks when they clapped. Young women wore small bells that chimed with soft, celestial tones when they spun.

Sagiri inhaled slowly as he watched from his spot, unmoving for hours. He stood alone on the ledge, wrapped in his shadow garments, face hidden behind his hood, eyes glowing from beneath his night-swallowing cloak. The Oru-Seals clung to his ears, black as obsidian, their runes swallowing the roar of the festival below until only a soft hush remained.

The Oru-Seals are sacred ear-guards crafted mostly for older people to aid with their healing. His, however were the opposite, they were not made to absorb sound but reject it. Each one cups his ear like a curved shell of blackened stone, fitted with impossibly delicate precision. His Oru-seals are made from quietstone, a rare mineral said to be hard to come by. There jagged runes etched along the inner curve, each one trembling faintly with every touch of sound. Thin strands of metal wrap behind his ears and anchor the seals without straps or ties. When worn, they muffle the world, dimming the storm of voices, footsteps, breaths, and heartbeat echoes that would otherwise crush him.

To Sagiri, they felt like sinking into deep water, heavy, still, and merciful. The Oru-Seals do not simply block sound. They drink it, swallowing excess noise before it reaches his ears. They were a gift to him from his father for his sixteenth birthday, which was still two months away. He didn't know what lengths he had gone to acquire the materials to make them, but he knew it must have been hard. He had left home six months ago to make them and find the materials. He returned after four months, which was two months ago, bearing the gift.

Back then, he couldn't leave his room because of how much he was in distress. his hearing had grown so much that he could hear whispers and noises from miles away, even when he did not want to. He could only feel warmth from his father when he finally gifted them to him, and it had warmed his heart with gratitude. It was the first festival he had attended since activating the power inside him at twelve. His folding blades rested at his side, asleep. He looked like a figure forged from loneliness and darkness, and perhaps he was.

Even from here, the weight of so many hearts, so many emotions, pressed on him like a storm. His power stirred, a deep, ancient force inside him that absorbed emotions, sound, chaos, and life. It whispered, curled, wanted to rise. He gripped the stone railing until his knuckles whitened.

"This is close enough," he murmured to himself. He hadn't noticed he had taken two steps forward involuntarily. He took three steps back and remained submerged in the dark.

Far below, the Youth Dance erupted into a wildfire of motion, the Ritu'Kana creating swirling ribbons of gold around the dancers' ankles. Families sat clustered in circles of warmth, warriors clashed in friendly tests of fire, and elders blessed children with glowing dust.

He watched it all with a strange ache of admiration, longing, and distance woven together. He had always been the outsider. The observer. The one who could not stand in the center of the light. No matter how much his parents loved him, his step-parents, he had always known they were not his real parents. He always felt deep emptiness inside, as if something big was missing from his life. Even so, he could still honour the night.

As the midnight drums struck, the sky cracked open, revealing the first appearance of the crescent moon. A roar rose from the crowd as thousands of Felxi Stones lifted into the air, streaking into the heavens like reverse falling stars. As it is custom, at midnight, everyone releases their Felxi Stones (**wish stones**), which streak into the sky. Felxi stones are light stones made of clay-like matter. When mixed with the shy flower portions, however, they become buoyant, and when they are thrown into the sky, they burst, releasing purple sparkling water. It explodes into waves of shimmering light like a living aurora, which people danced under until dawn.

Sagiri reached into his cloak to retrieve the small object. His own stone, darker than the others, heavier in his palm, pulsed as if recognizing the moment. No cheering voices surrounded him, no circle of family, no warm hands to hold. Only silence. Only wind.

He raised the Felxi Stone to the sky. Its inner galaxies swirled slowly, casting dim glimmers across his face.

"What do I even wish for?" he whispered. For power? For peace? For control? For a destiny that didn't frighten him? None of those felt right. His desire was something deeper. Something he knew he might never have. So he took a breath, closed his eyes, and let the truth rise.

"I wish... I wish to stand among them one day. Without fear. Without harming anyone. Just... to belong."

He opened his hand. The stone rose, hesitating, as though weighing the sincerity of his heart, before bursting into the air in a streak of deep violet and silver. It vanished into the light of the appearing moon with a shudder of light.

Below, the crowd shouted with joy at the beauty of the sky. They held onto each other tightly, heads lifted. He just watched quietly, expression unreadable. But for the first

time in a long time... hope flickered in his chest. A small, stubborn flame. Just enough to keep him watching the world he longed to join.

(Remember the words above are not real and I just created them for my book world. If by chance they sound like a language you know just please know its just a coincidence and I did not borrow from any language. Its just part of worldbuilding.)

Chapter 4: Chapter 4: THE ORIGIN

The beginning

And so it had begun when the first man to settle in the lands of Tasaka. Before Tagayia became Tagayia, it was called Tasaka. He was a man of mysterious origin. So the tales said. It was the same tales every mother said to their kids and their grandmothers instilled in them when they were sitting around the fire watching a pot on the three cooking stones. Perhaps it was a way to distract them from their hungry stomachs. A watched pot never boils, and so the young ones with their doe eyes wide with curiosity absorbed every word.

"His name was Taliga. He was a man talented in the art of hunting like the West. Talented in arts of war like the north, plants knowledge like the east, and innovative in new arts like the central."

"What about the south nana?" A round-eyed boy asked. He was among a dozen other kids from his clan, a third uncle's son from the third family tree. It was just custom to sit by the fire. Children belonged to the community, and a child belonged to every parent in the clan. After all, families made clans and clans made tribes, and in that order, tribes made nations.

"Aren't you a clever one?" Nana laughed her toothless mouth off her cackles echoing in the outside cooking area.

"I was getting there, my little one. Taliga was mysterious like the South. That was his faith quality. I have lived for a hundred years, and I haven't heard anything about the South. When I was just a girl. A beautiful girl I once met was a tourist from the south, and even he couldn't tell me anything about the south except that round-eyed kids who don't listen to their nana and parents disappear to the man-eating tribes in the south." Fear marked every child's eyes at the scary tale, making them move unconsciously closer to the fire.

"Taliga was blessed by the land with four wives. One tall and powerful fighter, especially with long hair, could drag behind her. She was a beauty, and her gray eyes could bewitch anyone. She made a spear and stood in front of him to protect him. Her name was Asaka Nakiya. Meaning powerful and beautiful.

"His second wife was charming and short, but she was blessed with fertility, and everything she touched flourished. Her hair defied gravity and stood in the sky. She was adorned with red ore, and her skin bore the markings of the land. Her chocolate orbs, like the earth, made her quite a beauty. Her name was Takata Sama, meaning the earth goddess.

"His third wife was fierce and vicious. She stood tall and proud, her neck filled with pride and her chest full of vigour. Her skin was as dark as night, and her eyes were the colour of the frozen oceans. She liked to be free, kept a shaven head, and she chased the wind and hunted prey. Taliga loved her even so and didn't restrain her, letting her run free and ride wild beasts. Her name was Sawaka Tatora, meaning a brave hunter.

"His fourth wife was the most silent of all. She kept to herself and spent her time studying the moon and the stars, trying to understand how they came to be. If she saw a stream, she could try to understand how it came to be. Her curiosity made her try to create numerical letters and mysterious objects to study the sky. Her name was Nayiaka Ng'inga. Meaning silent and curious.

"As ages passed, however, and the four wives gave birth to sons and daughters, Taliga's misfortune began. The children loved what their mothers loved, and none took after him."

"That is sad, Nana." This time, it was a round-eyed girl with hair that defied gravity who spoke. She was adorned with tribal beads in her hair, her hands, and her forehead. Her round eyes showed sadness.

"Now now, young one," grandmother laughed with her old lungs, making it sound more like a whizz than a laugh.

"Taliga, of course, was sad, dear, but he was happy to have been blessed with four wives. The problem, however, grew when the children grew, and they couldn't play together because they loved different things. They found each other's interests boring. The first wives' children found the second wives' children's love for making medicine boring. The third wife's children found the fourth wife's children loud and uncultured, and so enmity broke out within his family

"Taliga couldn't take it anymore, and so to keep the peace, he had to make a decision that could break his heart. He sent the first wife and her children to the north, where grasslands lay, so she could be a warrior and protect the north. He sent the second wife east, where many herbs lay, so she could exercise her love for medicinal herbs and the growing of plants. He sent his fourth wife west, where many wild beasts lay, so she could travel freely and tame the beasts. The third wife hated change, and so she remained in the central lands to study the stars and the earth.

"Taliga couldn't live with only one wife or choose one because that would be inequality. So he moved south on his own and made all his wives swear not to follow him. And so

Taliga moved south, and none of his wives followed him as they had promised. With the first wife moving north, the second moving east, the third remaining in the central lands, and the fourth moving west, Taliga went south behind the sea, and no one heard of him again."

"But won't Taliga be lonely?" another kid asked Nana this time, wiping a tear like all the other children who now had moist eyes. It was a sad story indeed, and all our hearts had been broken and shattered into pieces. Why couldn't they just stick together and have a happy ending?

"What happened to Taliga?" Another round-eyed eyed now teary-eyed cousin asked.

"Of course, he was lonely," Nana answered the question. "But sometimes hard decisions have to be made to keep the peace and keep everyone happy."

Happy? The young kids couldn't understand how the decision Taliga made could make anyone happy. It was just a sad ending. That was all it was.

"It is said that in the south, beyond the desert, Taliga found a wicked woman with white hair that could turn red at night and grey in the morning. Her eyes were the colour of the sun, and she emerged from the sand in the desert. She bewitched Taliga, and he followed after her for the rest of his life, never to return from the south. That is why no one dares to go beyond the desert in the south."

'Poor Taliga,' the round-eyed boy thought, 'bewitched by a wicked woman.' What a miserable end for Taliga.

"Even now, the descendants of the wicked woman roam the earth. If you look them in the eyes, you won't be able to look away, and you will follow them without a thought and be their slave for the rest of your lives. That is, if they don't eat you first." Nana said the last part with a slow and scary tone, making the youngins scream in terror and hold onto each other."

That is the tale of how the tribes came to be. The children of Taga further separated into more tribes, and that is how tribes came to be. That is also how the four dialects came to be. The tribes of the north, besides their mother tongue, spoke a northern dialect, stolen from each tribe, and so is the east, and so is the west, and the central regions. Every child born speaks two languages and an additional national language created by borrowing words from the four tongues of the north, east, west, and central.

The tribes came together again, not many years ago, however, forming the United Tribes. They now abided under one ruler, the Supreme Mandra. Under him were four Great Chiefs from every region. They hold the title of 'The Grand Zorath'. Each one presides over the four parliaments. The Kaya is the traditional parliament of every region. The eastern tribes, the western tribes, the northern tribes, and the central tribes all have a parliament. Each tribe is ruled by a chief who has a permanent seat in the

Kaya. Tagayia has two parliaments, the Kaya, which is presided over by the Grand Zorath, and the Kal'Sika, which is presided over by the Supreme Mandra.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5: DREAMS

Sagiri stood in a vast desert, yet his feet remained suspended. It felt like a dream and reality woven one. He was standing in that place, yet he wasn't. This was not the first time he had had the dream. He always dreamt of places he hadn't been to yet, places he felt familiar with. Sometimes when he woke up, he couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't. The dreams had started when he turned twelve, and they had gotten more surreal and more intense as years went by. Since he turned sixteen, everything turned from bad to worse, and he couldn't remember the last time he slept peacefully.

Tonight, he was back in the desert yet again. He was standing, yet his feet remained suspended. A throne of sand sat before him. It looked ragged and old, as if it were on the verge of collapse. From it, four paths diverged, and they all begged him to walk them, yet just like any other day, he did not know which path to take. On the throne sat a beautiful woman, she looked sad and anxious, on her body she bore the same marking patterns as him. She also looked like him. Like his mother. He had long known that his parents were not his biological parents, yet he still loved them and never once did he miss his real parents. He had never met them, and he did not know why they were not with him. He knew his parents kept it a secret, thinking he was too young to understand, and he had learnt to let things be. 'Mom?' He opened his mouth to call her involuntarily, but no sound came out.

The woman's mouth kept moving, but no sound came out. As she grew more anxious, the desert around them grew uneasy, and it screamed like a living creature. The voice was horrific, and Sagiri tried to wake himself to get away, but he couldn't. He saw a shadow army marching north, emerging in thousands out of the dunes, cities in the north collapsed by their hand, and their fury struck fear in his heart, yet he felt kinship with them. The four colleges of the north collapsed, and the united tribes were overthrown. The woman yelled with tears of blood. "Choose, child of memory. Choose who you will destroy." Then the dream ended, and he shot up on his sleeping mat, sweat dripping down his back. The hut was dark except for the faint glow emanating from the marks on his body that were rearranging themselves into a message he couldn't yet read. 'Who am I?' he thought to himself.

"What am I?" He asked loudly, looking at the markings on his body, which were glowing in the dark. "Why does the desert whisper to me, and why do I bear these cursed marks on my body. One thing was for sure. He had answers, and he was not going to get them hiding in the small village. Perhaps there was someone out there like him. Sometimes the desert whispers like wind over stone, and sometimes it hums as if it were alive, yet tonight it screamed with urgency.

He wiped sweat from his brow. His heartbeat thudded like a drum inside his skull. The dream still clung to him, the picture of the throne of sand was still fresh in his memories, and her words, "*Choose who you will destroy,*"

still repeated themselves in his head. He never understood his dreams, and he did not have an explanation for them.

Sagiri shivered.

The desert far, far beyond the village pulsed with heat. He could hear voices in the wind. It was far beyond where he had ever been, yet he could feel it, its echoes, its warnings, and the memories it held that did not belong to him. Yet it still called to him, a place he had never been to, called to him.

"Another nightmare?" Rusha's voice floated from the doorway. Her silhouette was small, wrapped in a faded shawl. But he could hear her heart beating too fast. He always could. She always came to check on him every night with a cup of water. She always showed concern, but she did not know how to help him.

"Yes," he whispered.

She stepped inside and knelt beside him, pressing a cool cloth to his brow. Her hands trembled. "You don't need to worry, they will come to pass," she said softly. But the lie in her voice quivered like a snapped string. He, however, didn't call her out. He never did.

Outside, suddenly, footsteps crunched on the dry soil. Sagiri felt them before he heard them. He must have been distracted by his dreams and missed them. There were more than one pair. They were swift, heavy, measured, trained, and they had come in numbers. Sagiri stiffened. Rusha's eyes widened only slightly. But that was enough.

"They're here," she whispered. Sagiri had known they could come for him one day, and contrary to his parents' fear, deep down he waited for them. He knew they knew something about him when he had encountered them at twelve. If he wanted answers on who he was, they were the perfect place. He could let them have whatever they sought from him, and in exchange, he would get answers about who he was and why he was different. It was a win-win situation.

A knock thundered on the main door, three loud official strikes. Bakuru's voice came from the other side of the door, rough and tense. "Sagiri, get dressed! Quickly!" However, before Sagiri could move a muscle, the door was thrown off its hinges with force. Northern officials stepped inside, armed to the teeth, wrapped in dark cloaks, faces shadowed, and bearing the emblem of the Ten Schools Selection Council. 'Enemy,' the archive inside him warned, but he ignored it. This time, he wanted something from them, so he ignored the warning. The feeling of fear surrounded them,

and he could almost taste it on his lips. They feared him, and he wanted to know why. Even for picking an aged recruit for the high school enrollment, it was a bit excessive.

The tallest of them scanned Sagiri with a gaze that felt like a knife. He smelled of fear, but he kept it in check, unlike his minions, who were holding a defensive position as if they were facing a powerful and volatile enemy. "There is a youth of this house," the official said. "He is to be evaluated for potential aged student enrollment."

Rusha swallowed in fear, and it made Sagiri angry that they scared his mother. He rubbed her arm to reassure her before standing to his feet. The officials swallowed and moved back on instinct. Bakuru stepped forward, jaw tight, placing himself between Sagiri and the tallest one, who looked like the leader.

"He is not interested," the older man murmured.

"It is not your decision," the official replied.

Sagiri suddenly felt a vibration under his feet, not from the officials but from the sand itself responding to the rising panic in the room and his slight anger. It had responded to his anger a second ago. The official's eyes narrowed, studying him. He had felt the tremor, and he feared that the situation to escalate.

"Boy," he said quietly. "Come with us please. We have orders to pick you up. Corporate with us." His tone was firm, but Sagiri did not miss the fear in his voice.

"Wait outside, I need to talk to my parents first." His voice held calmness beyond his ears, and after a long pause, the official signaled the others to move outside. After the last of them had stepped outside, Sagiri pulled his clothes, covering every inch of his skin. The officials might have missed the markings on his body because it was dark inside, even as it approached morning, yet he, as much as he wanted to know who he was, he did not want to reveal too much too soon.

"Sagiri, I'm sorry I didn't protect you," Rusha's eyes filled with tears as he pulled him into a hug. "I wanted to tell you everything, but they came too soon, my child," she wailed, and her sadness washed over Sagiri, making him emotional, but his mind was made. He needed to leave to find answers. Bakuru stood quietly beside his wife, but Sagiri could still feel his deep sadness. He could always feel the deep emotions when one was around him.

"Don't smother the boy, he is just going to school, he'll be back." Bakuru urged his wife while peeling her off of Sagiri.

"I'll be back, mother, father." He said slowly, feeling emotional about leaving the only place he knew as home. His parents might have kept secrets from him, but they weren't malicious, and he knew that. He touched his forehead to the back of his parents' hands before he walked out, not looking back. As he followed the officials, however, for a

moment, Sagiri looked back at the only home he had ever known. Rusha's tear-filled eyes. Bakuru's unspoken warning. The desert wind howled like a wounded beast, and then the markings on his chest shifted again as if urging him forward.

He stepped toward the officials, and the world he knew ended.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6: THE JOURNEY

It took the official caravan three days to reach the Cilsu city of the eastern tribes, even going at full speed. It seemed that they were under strict instructions not to delay or make unnecessary stops. They barely stopped for four hours to sleep at a small town south of the eastern tribes before they were on the move again. Sagiri had never left the small village of Wuzi since he was a child, and watching the changing landscapes was overwhelming for him. He was sharing a carriage with the tallest and the leader of the group, whom he knew as Jalume. They hadn't exchanged a word since the journey started, and he appreciated the silence. Sagiri shut his eyes and let himself be lost in the silence that was in his mind. He hadn't dreamt since he left home, and he had spent the journey in a meditative state.

"We are approaching Cilsu, we will rest in the military headquarters of Cilsu for a day before heading to Molakwa," Jalume announced after another few hours of travel.

The state of Tagayia is made up of six cities. Galka, the capital city of the north, Cilsu, the capital city of the east, Kafika, the capital city of the west, and Molakwa, the capital city of the central tribes. The two biggest cities are located at the edge of the tribes. The fifth city and the second largest city is the city of Zandeko'alsi. It is located at the apex of the north-west and central planes. It is the home of the Kaya parliament. The sixth and the final city is the Alike city, which is the home of the supreme Mandra and the high-ranking official of Tagayia. Sagiri knew they were going to the city of Zandeko'alsi. It is where the traditional parliament was, and he needed the approval of at least five tribe chiefs to enter a high school.

Tagayia consisted of three levels of school. The first level is tribal schools for kids under twelve, where every tribe had one, where the young ones went to learn mostly about their tribe's origin, traditions, and proper etiquette. They also learned basics about their tribal arts, be it in medicine, innovation, war, or hunting, and tribal dances and music. Rights and tribal marks are also taught here.

The second level is the integrated school. Young youths from the age of thirteen went to this school to learn about World Calculations, the Art of War, the Art of Hunting, Building Studies, Plant Studies, Innovation and Technology Studies, Tribal History Studies, Tagayia Language Studies, Human Anatomy, Fitness Studies, Medicine, and Weaponry. A total of twelve subjects that could push the youths to the limit. Only a genius could get a top grade in all of them, and only the smart could pass in more than half the subjects. Tagayia consists of ten integrated schools: the Galka War Academy, Kafika Rift Academy, Molakwa Forge Academy, Cilsu Healers Academy, Tisaro Arc

Academy, Yalami Forest Academy, Konate Wild Academy, Daziko Sun School, Zoli Sea School, and Lokuza Spirit School. Apart from the twelve subjects, the schools also taught other subjects tied to the school histories.

Sagiri did not get to join any of the high schools at thirteen because his parents were worried for him and chose to homeschool him. There was nothing much they could teach him about the tribes because he already knew. The archive inside of him had all the history of the tribes. His father, Bakuru Oyaka Mekarili, is from the central plains, and he is from the Mekarili tribe. They are a tribe known for their deep roots in making human machinery. If a soldier lost his foot during war, he could create a new mechanical one. He however had left the military, sagiri did not know why and he had stopped the archive from prying into his past, he could have known if he wanted to since they live together but he did not want to invade his privacy, his father no matter how dark the past he tried to hide had always been kind to him and if he didn't tell him then he couldn't pry. His mother, Rusha Eka Tavasheni, is from the Eka clan of the Tavasheni tribe. They specialize in making medicine from herbs, and she was good at it. Everyone at the Wuzi village called her healer Rusha, and she was worthy of their name

They were not his biological parents, and he had not cared to know his real ones. Bakuru travelled far and wide to get the materials to make the Oru-Seals, the reversed function hearing shells. Each one cups his ear like a curved shell of blackened stone, fitted with impossibly delicate precision. They tried to homeschool him in healing and human machinery, and he was not too bad at it. Even so, he knew he was missing a lot of information, yet it seemed that the archive was blocking some information from him.

The city of Cilsu was bustling with life, and Sagiri could feel it before the wagons pulled through the city gates. It hit him like a punch in the gut. The bustling streets and the bodies flooding the streets were too overwhelming and his eyes snapped open. He was thankful that the Oru-seals were a blessing because they swallowed all the noise, even so he could still feel the noise. His hands tightened into fists as feelings of the crowd, the sadness, the joy, the anxiety and all the hustle buzzle hit him.

"Are you okay?" Jalume asked, watching him carefully.

"Too much noise," he said, his sharp eyes narrowed. The journey to the headquarters took another hour because it was on the other side near the outskirts of Cilsu city. The camp was buzzing with military personnel who were going over their drills. Sagiri however did not care to look and he wanted to get out of there and find a quiet place to sit. When he was seated in his allocated cubicle and shut the door behind him he was able to take a deep breath. His ability to perceive what people around him felt was getting louder and he was starting to wonder how long before even the Oru-shells couldn't protect his ears.

"What am I?" He found himself wondering again but no answers came from the quiet room around him.

After a night of rest they left Cilsa early in the morning before the city could come to life and he was thankful for that. The journey to Molakwa city took four more days. It was mostly through the thick woods and occasional establishments. Many rain forests stood between Cilsa city and Molakwa city that Sagiri found himself enjoying the journey. It rained all the way to Molakwa and he slipped back to his meditative state. The government road was smooth and it allowed for the much needed relaxation. The city Molakwa was even bigger Cilsa city and Sagiri was a little curious to see the home Bakuru had grown up. It was still loud but when he imagined Bakuru's younger self walking the streets everything else went silent.

"Can I walk around for a bit?" Sagiri asked Jalume who was awake but staring into nothingness. It seemed the journey had taken a toll on him and he was tired of baby sitting.

"Why?" Jalume asked regarding him suspiciously.

"This is my father's home, I wish to see it." He said seriously and he meant it. He had never been good at lying or calling spade a spoon. He only allowed his parents to lie to him and agreed to their lies.

"Perhaps later after we get to the inn," he lied, he was skeptical and he thought he could run.

"Now." Sagiri said and Jalume felt fear. It was a command and he felt obligated to oblige.

The street vendors regarded him weirdly, people of Molakwa are colorful people and his dull attire consisting only of black stood out like a sore thumb. Different snacks were being sold and he wished to taste them. He walked to one stall and picked a small candy before moving to the next. He barely heard the vendor curse before Jalume apologized and paid. Suddenly he could see echo reflections of Bakuru's younger self. He was dressed in a yellow attire and he was running down an opposite street. He followed through almost running to people. To them he appeared to be in a trance and they moved aside. He chased the reflection down another backstreet. He was happy and the little fans of the little toy he held spun as fast as he ran. He was really happy and Sagiri wondered why he had grown to be gloomy and not smile again.

"Baku... don't run so carelessly!" A woman dressed in a long flowy colorful dress appeared. She looked exactly like a young Bakuru and she pinched his ears.

"Mother, look at the new toy I made!" young Bakuru yelled in excitement and the woman smiled lovingly. Sagiri had only ever felt such kinship with the woman from her dreams and for the first time in his life a small ache built in his chest. Is that woman really my mother?

"You can't go any further!" Jalume yelled behind him, shattering the echo reflections. Only then did sagiri realize he had walked into a street and was far from the main street.

"Let's go back." Was all he said however leading the way. Somehow he now knew the streets of Molakwa like the back of his hands. And for the first time he wanted to find the woman in her dreams. After another night of rest they headed for the second largest city of Tagayia, the city of Zandeko'alsi. The journey took four more days. More towns littered around the way and sagiri did not get a moment of peace. If Zandeko'alsi was more crowded than Molakwa city of the central plains then he was in for a rough time. He should have gotten used to the hullabaloo and hustle buzzle that never stopped in his mind but it somehow got louder daily. And yet he felt like they were all fragments.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7: THE SUBJECT

"Are you sure he is the one we are looking for?" the voice behind the veil asked harshly.

"Yes commander, I am sure this boy might be the one you are looking for." The other one trembled in fear of disappointing his master.

"But that is what you said the last time and the time before that!" the other voice sneered with boredom. This was clearly not his first rodeo.

"I dare not disappoint you again commander, I have a source that is reliable and it said that the boy has some weird senses, I dare not lie to you!"

"That is what you said about the other ten boys and one girl, even my influence at the council runs short!" the voice said in a warning as to say, the other could hear the silent threat 'this is your last chance and if i find out he is not indeed the one then ill kill you myself'. The only reason he remained alive after so many failures was because he was a genius and loyal to his immoral arts. However even that could run out of time and he knew he only had one chance left. His lord was not a patient man.

"My lord I bet my life on this one, if we don't get him into a high school now we wont be able to have him under our watch and if the 'others' move to gain favour with him before us then we might have a weapon on our hands, we better have a weapon we can control before anyone else does" he begged, his tongue as sweet as honey. He knew how to get his commander's attention. "Besides, if he doesn't join a high school now he won't be able to join the great trials for the four colleges and it might be too late to control him legally."

"The child is an abomination, we prove it's him then we kill him if he doesn't submit to us" the voice snapped.

"Of course my lord, he will be ours to control or kill, it is a win win" he said, remaining on one knee with his head bowed.

"But if he ends up to be a disappointment, and a waste of my connections and resources then I'll kill you both!" he said before going silent. The sidekick knew his commander meant every word and he hoped for his head sake his spy was right this time. He bowed deeply to leave his red attire sweeping behind him but it seemed his commander was not done for the day.

"How is the project Lava IX" his voice asked again filled with more disappointment. " You know it's no use if we can't have a countermeasure if plan A and B fails"

"I need a few more days to test the subject ...my lord" the sidekick said, his voice riddled with shame.

"You disappoint me!" the commander snapped.

"It is in the final stages my lord, give me a fortnight and I'll give you a satisfactory answer"

"You have a week! Now leave my sight!" His voice thundered before all the lights went off. His commander was from the clan whose secret art was walking in the shadows. The lamps going out meant he had reached his limit with his minion and he needed results not a sweet tongue. He bowed deeply holding only admiration for his commander amidst the fear before he exited, he needed to hurry. He after all loved no one above himself. He is a selfish person who loves to have his head attached to his shoulders above his head. He moved quickly away from the city. His one destination was miles away from civilization and in the clutches of one of the barren lands in the outskirts of the west.

He needed to double the doze and break a few bones if he needed to. The secret doorway attached to stone opened silently and closed as soon as he stepped foot inside. He pushed another door and took a left before heading to an elevator leading underground. He loved the smell of the damp earth that had never seen the sun. He inhale deeply enjoying the change of smell as the elevator came to a stop above his lab. His minions were working tirelessly and he could have loved to reward them but they had failed to produce a result and caused him pain with his commander. For that reason a person needed to pay. With their blood. Hard work without result was a waste of time.

"Sir black..." a minion greeted him as soon as he arrived and he was going to make an example out of him. A wicked smile took over his face and he almost strangled the fat short man but his next words saved his life. "...we might have achieved success" his voice trembled. Many of his companions had died by doing mere mistakes like walking slowly or breathing too loud and seeing sir black's mood he had hastened to share the good news if only to protect his head and his remaining friend.

"Aha!" Was all he said a more crazed smile taking over his uncovered part of the face. He always wore a red mask on one side of his face. He was always dressed in red. Perhaps it is because it is the colour of blood that he so much loves to shed. His frail

and tall figure moved so quickly that it seemed he was walking on wheels. He almost threw the door to the inner lab of its hinges in haste. Many subjects had not been able to endure his method through the years and had passed away. Only one percent had made it to maturity and even those turned out to be failures. Some became just vegetables who took order too slowly and some could just self destroy themselves. He took another elevator to his creation lab and he almost toppled in pain at the sight behind the glass.

"Yes yes!" he screamed a voice so disturbing to hear that the shorter and plumper man covered his ears.

"Can we go home now sir?" He asked slowly, almost scared of the result. Sir black stopped laughing and turned to look at him as he hadn't noticed another presence in the room till that moment.

"Of course, you'll get to go home pretty soon." He said almost too calmly that the shorter man did not know whether to be excited or run. "First, will you do one thing for me Mr. Osheri?" he asked, deliberately reading the name attached to his collar and Mr. Osheri nodded, almost eager to do what he was asked so that he could get to go home. He had not been back home for years and he missed his clan.

"Can you enter the chamber for me?" he asked pressing the button to open the chamber where the subject sat unmoving.

"Me ?" he asked, feeling fear.

"Of course, you will do anything to see your lovely wife again right?" he asked, sounding so genuine that Osheri felt a chill run down his spine. He wanted to decline but he knew Sir Black never takes no for an answer. He swallowed nervously before taking a step towards the chamber. One two of his feet were securely inside, the chamber door snapped closed and he turned around in horror. Sir Black was smiling like the maniac he was. He tried to pry the door open but it of course didn't bulge. It was created especially by innovators from the central plains to withstand even the fiercest beasts ramming into it.

"Please let me out!" he begged in horror. He knew sir black was a sadist who enjoyed it when his victims begged but he had no other choice but to beg. Sir black cackled even louder before wearing his almost innocent face.

"Why are you so scared? Look at how adorable the subject is?" He diverted his gaze to the subject looking at it as if it was a harmless doll but Osheri and his friends had trained it and programmed it and he knew it was a dangerous thing.

"I don't want to die please black, I don't even want to go home anymore," he begged.

"Why are you humans like this? You wanted to do anything to see your family again and now you don't. You disappoint me Mr. Osheri. I had so many expectations from you." He shook his head in disappointment before moving to a larger panel containing all the control buttons to the subject.

"Kill him." He said the command looking bored and Mr. Osheri's panic turned to dread. He watched as the subject turned its head to focus on him before it bounced. Agile yet graceful. Powerful and robotic. It ripped Mr. Osheri apart with its bare hands. His screams were music to Sir Black's ears and he cackled even harder. He watched with love as the subject returned to its original position as if it hadn't just torn a man to shreds mere seconds ago.

"Perfect!" he cheered.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8: ZANDEKO'ALSI

"We will be arriving in Zandeko city soon," Jalume announced after another three days of travel. A total of ten days clumped up in the small space was enough to drive everyone crazy. Sagiri could feel the restlessness of the city long before he entered it. His arrival had seemed urgent, and he did not need the archive to know many strings were being pulled for his sake. Jalume started speaking in Western dialogue, the Wenji speech of the West, and he must have thought Sagiri couldn't understand. The archive he bore, however, had the history of all tribes and their languages.

There were not many languages he could not understand. He had kept that fact from his parents, and he was going to keep it from everyone. He did not know yet the intention of the one who wanted him to be enrolled in a high school so late in his age, and so he could only play it safe till he understood the agenda. Someone in this city wanted him and knew who he was more than he did, and he wanted to know why. To know that he had to keep a low profile and play the mysterious card until he had full information.

Sil alka fal salkiya magata'lata fala," Jalume said in the Wenji speech.

(meaning: our task is almost done, you forget it ever happened.)

The western tribes spoke the Wenji speech, derived from all their tribal languages. It's rhythmic and rolls off the tongue with clicking sounds. The north had the Korun tongue, which has harsh consonants, deep vowels, and sharp endings. The eastern tribes have the Sulari tongue, which is softer, open, melodic than the first two. The central plains tongue is the Keshu dialect, a mixture of harsh and soft consonants. Sagiri had realized he could understand foreign languages at thirteen when his mother, a healer, had brought home an injured traveler, and he had understood what he was trying to say without a hitch and translated it to his mother. The traveler was from the Yuloraki tribe from the central plains, and it was the first time he had heard the Yuloraki language and he understood it without a hitch. Of course, his father, coming from the central plains, had had to explain to the stranger how a young boy spoke his mother tongue without a

hitch and had to lie about how he had a secret tutor who was teaching him. Since then, he had learned to pretend he didn't understand other tongues when he crossed paths, though rarely with travelers.

He said after their last stop sixty vaara from the city. Sagiri could gather the serious insistence in his tone. He had just been an errand boy, and his master must be fierce to make him sound so fearful.

(A vaara: it is a unit of measurement of distance, meaning 'Throwing distance'. How far an average warrior can throw a weighted spear, which is one hundred metres, so 10 vaara =1km.

The journey from then on had been filled with tension, and Sagiri could almost taste the fear from them. When the city finally came to view he was slightly taken aback. It was truly worthy to be called the home of the Kaya. The Gate of Zandeko rose like a mountain of carved stone and hammered metal, its massive panels etched with the spiraling runes of the old dynasties. The engravings glimmered faintly, catching the last breaths of daylight. They lay wide open, and behind them, medieval architectural buildings were seated on top of each other on the steep terrain, making them look like a maze of half-circles from a distance. It was more intimidating up close than what Sagiri had seen from afar.

Many lowest rank, lowest crested wardens stood by the gate patrolling every inch of the place, and they were armed with war spears. They are a rank of elite soldiers who have yet to rise to any rank. Their uniforms were simple compared to the elite soldiers. They wore matte grey tunics, reinforced with thin iron-stitched padding. Their armor plates were etched with copper. The metal was dull, practical, and deliberately plain. A single stripe dyed in faded indigo marked their rank as fourth rank or newbies in training. Their spears were shorter than those of the elite, meant for control rather than battle. Many also carried blunt-tipped knives, which they used to pry open sealed travel documents.

The check-up at the huge gate, leading into the city, took more than half an hour before they were finally allowed to pull through. Every one of the dozen officials was checked thoroughly. More than half the group had remained on the outskirts of town, and Sagiri guessed it was to dwindle suspicion. Two dozen officials escorting one boy could have raised too many eyebrows after all. Hundreds of carriages pulled through the city to and from. The city looked fancy, and from the checkup, Sagiri could tell that only people of high importance and vast riches could afford to live in the City Centre. Women were dressed in the most flashy tunics and adorned with heavy, shiny jewelry. The men were dressed in long-sleeved overcoats and wielded walking sticks that were curved from the most exquisite materials.

The carriages pulled through but soon stopped going in the direction of the inner city.

"The kaya is in session today to discuss the budget of the coming mid-year trials in four months, so we can't use the central road. We will have to divert and take the long way,"

Jalume announced, and the carriages were steered in another direction. Although the city was far, far bigger than both Molakwa and Cilsu, there was a lack of enthusiasm and excitement. It was much quieter than Sagiri had expected. Perhaps riches came with less joy. He could only perceive emptiness and insincerity, and he wondered what awaited him. It seemed the inhabitants of great cities were conceited schemers and liars, and he could taste all the feelings flooding the air.

The compound they would be staying at was much bigger than any of the ones they had stayed at before, and the food was more pleasing. It was far from the inner city but far from the outer city. It was silent, and he appreciated it. He had not had nightmares or visions since the journey started, and he wondered if it was a good sign or a bad one.

"When do I get to join a school?" Sagiri asked once he was shown to his resting chambers.

"I don't know..." Jalume started, and Sagiri stopped him, his voice cold. He knew he was lying, and there was a lot he wasn't telling him. He was not going to ask too much, but knowing too little is an even greater tragedy

"Don't lie to me, I am not a child, I know only kids of the age of thirteen get to join a high school. I'm well past that age, and I am nothing special," he lied through his teeth, not acting too stupid and not acting too smart either.

"Perhaps you are just lucky, don't ask too many questions." Jalume lied again. Whoever was behind him must have been so powerful and more scary to have him lie so blatantly. "There are other youths too, you are not the only one." The last statement was not a lie, and Sagiri nodded.

"How many?" He asked a simpler question, seeing as how getting the truth out of him could be nearly impossible. If only he could touch his head and pry into his strongest thoughts without giving himself away. He had learned he could perceive people's strongest emotions by being close to them and even touch their memories by touching them. He wished whatever the power was inside of him could allow him to pry without touching them, yet every time he tried, he seemed to be locked out by something. It was as if he could feel the power inside of him, but he couldn't touch its true potential yet. Something was missing, and his agreeing to walk into a possible enemy trap was his only way of knowing himself.

"Three, but you will not be meeting them. All I know is your exam will be in three days after the Kaya parliament adjourns for the season, and my job is to take you to the examiners' council headquarters. So instead of asking about things you shouldn't, you should prepare for your exams. I know you wouldn't have come all the way if you did not want to." Jalume said. He had clearly seen a lot in his days, and he was wiser than he looked.

The following three days were spent in boredom in the endless mansion with only servants. Sagiri spent his days pretending to read in the library about the history of Tagayia and the languages. He already knew enough history from the archive inside of him, although some parts were locked away just like his other power. He could feel something big moving, whispering, flowing inside of him, yet it felt like he lacked a key to access it. It scared him as much as it made him curious. If only he could touch the locked door inside him, perhaps he could know who he really was.

Meals were dropped off at his room and bath water, but none of the servants dared to talk to him for the entire period. It was as if they had been given instructions not to talk to him. He could only perceive obedience and loyalty from them to their master, and he wondered what kind of person could command such obedience without question. They were not scared. It was as if they were ready to die for whoever they worked for, and they were fine with it. He had never met a set of people he could not perceive their emotions, and he wondered if it was planned. He did not see Jalume and the others since they arrived, and he wondered if everyone had been asked to avoid him. He did not love crowds nor people, but he did not believe in things going too well. Something was fishy.

The three days finally elapsed and what he had been waiting for since he left the only place he could call home, was within his reach. He could get into a high school no matter what. It was the stepping stone for him to find out who he was and to finally stop living like a blind person.

Chapter 9: Chapter 9: THE EXAM I

Dawn had not yet broken when Jalume came to pick Sagiri. He had not been able to sleep anyway and he had heard him coming long before he knocked on his door. Him and the seven officials accompanying him were dressed in new official uniforms that looked more ceremonial and not the basic scout uniform they wore when they picked him up.

"We leave now." The carriages hummed loudly on the silent roads as they pulled into the central road. The Kaya and the exam Council Headquarters are in the same part of the city. It is partly to show the relationship between the Kaya and the exam council. Once kids hit the age of thirteen the most genius in traditional arts and other subjects were recommended to join the tests where the best of the best were picked to join a high school. Tagayia was founded on geniuses and hard work and it was only fair to give the cream of the crop an opportunity to push the state forward in the future. The exams were tough but they were mostly on history languages and the secret traditional arts. Other tests were involved too which are a secret and failing more than half meant you have no future. Some always gave up but others could come again the next year better and stronger.

The Grand Exam Council is the highest institution governing all learning, merits, and national certification. It was founded centuries ago by scholars, seers, and engineers

who believed no knowledge should exist without discipline and character. As much as the knowledge of students was tested, their character and discipline was also tested.

Chairing the council and sitting in the highest position is the high assessor. He chairs and oversees all examinations, approves new syllabuses, and safeguards the Seal of Merit. Under him are the nine observers. They are nine mysterious figures who appear at major exams. They never speak publicly and always wear veiled masks. No one knows their full identity the same as the high assessor. Under the nine are the seal masters who guard the exam scripts. Each script is locked with a name seal that can only be opened once by the student who bears its name. Then there are the trial wardens who Command exam halls, ensure fairness and prevent cheating, then the ink keepers who are librarians or archivists, they store every exam ever written and maintain the history of the exam council. Then, specifically from the Aruke tribe north of the east whose secret tribal art is reading emotions and detecting intentions. who only the purest of clans get to learn it are the mind readers. the position is the only monopolized position in the whole council. They are Elders trained in detecting intention, truth, and emotional stability since they were young and they are essential in oral exams.

The lowest of rank is that of the gate registers who consist of low ranking elite wardens whose job is to check identities, control entry, and maintain order.

The horizon had already settled into its pale gold when sagiri and his baby seaters finally reached the foot of the exam Citadel. From afar, the building looked like a mountain carved by ancient stones. Supporting it are seven rising terraces, each glowing with thin blue ornaments veins that pulsed in slow, deliberate rhythms. Up close, however, the Citadel was overwhelming. Black volcanic pillars twisted upwards so high. On both sides of the door silent artificial waterfalls streamed down artificial book statures , falling in perfect soundless and repeating the motion. The air tasted of stone, old ink, and the faint sting of tension.

One of the gate wardens stepped forward the moment Sagiri came into range. They wore the standard uniform, dark brown tunic, hardened crescent-shaped shoulder guards and copper-threaded boots. their faces however were hidden behind their helmet.

"You are late," he said to Jalume while reading the name plate now hanging on Sagiri's neck. It seemed that he had been expecting them. Any person from any of the over a hundred clans of Tagayia bore three names. The personal name that only one person bore in three generations, the clan name and the tribe name. Sagiri however had one name and when he asked his parents they had told him it was because they were from different regions and they failed to decide which tribal name they could give them. That was a fat lie because a child took their fathers clan name and tribe name. The name tag was given to him by Jalume before they left.

"You all fall back." The ward said referring to the eight officials and suddenly sagiri felt lonely and looked at Jalume. Their relationship though like that of a merchant and his goods lasted ten long days and he wasn't so heartless as to not miss his tense company. "Only the student gets to enter." The warden added starting to open the humongous gate. For a moment Jalume's gaze softened but it hardened again.

"This is as far as we go, do your best." He tapped his fist to his chest before retreating and disappearing into the carriages.

"You're the aged candidate?" the Gate ward said when the others had left. It was not meant as an insult on the contrary it was factual.

Sagiri nodded. "Yes."

"Place your hand on the Identify Frame." He said pointing at a platform just outside the gate with artificial hands curved into them. The Identify Frame trembled when Sagiri touched it, lighting up with recognition. Most frames glowed softly. His flared violently bright, too bright as though trying to read something beyond human measure. Memories and echo reflections of how the Frame came to be and the thousand of hands who touched it before him came crashing to his mind. Nothing like that had ever happened and he had only ever thought he could read human minds by touching them. Can I also read into mediaeval structures just by touching them? He wandered, staggering back a little bit as the echo inside of him swallowed the memories of the sigil frame.

The Gate wardens stiffened. The Identity frame had never reacted like that. It only glowed softly to register and verify candidates identities, yet it was glowing violently in front of his eyes. He had seen a dozen aged candidates brought in before but the sigil frame had not vacated any different. His mind piqued with interest wondering if this aged student he had been asked to let through without question was something special.

"...Unusual reaction," he murmured.

Sagiri removed his hand before the glow grew dangerous. "Is it sufficient?" A long pause followed, the warden still amazed by what his eyes had beheld. Then he stepped aside slowly.

"Proceed. The direction Marshal will show you the way." He said distractedly, looking at the youth covered from head to toe in a black cloak in a new light. Sagiri walked along the polished pathway. Inside the gate, the main walkway curved toward the main terrace. The stone beneath Sagiri's feet was smooth, unnervingly warm, humming with the residual energy of thousands who had passed before him.

At the first bend stood a direction Marshal, tall and lean, wrapped in an ash-grey coat trimmed with blue. His ash-grey coat fluttered in the morning wind as he stood straight-backed, signal rod in hand. Students usually approached in crowds, chatting nervously.

But the approaching youth walked alone. A lone figure in a place built for masses. The marshal waited for him to approach.

"You are the aged student," he said flatly.

"I was homeschooled," Sagiri replied. The Marshal scanned him with the glowing end of the rod. The light flickered, hesitated, then steadied.

"You carry no artifacts from outside. Good." He tilted his head. "But your pulse is racing." Sagiri shrugged.

"Anxiety." He lied but the archive usually took a toll on him every time it got activated and he had not anticipated it to react to the sigil frame. He was still recovering from the event. The Marshal didn't believe him but he didn't press.

"Script Runners will take you to your chamber. You will not join the youths already inside." It was exactly what Sagiri expected. A separated path meant control. Surveillance. Someone was already manipulating his placement.

Good.

He continued forward, jaw set as they walked the path for a few minutes. When they approached another building, Two Script Runners appeared from a side passage, lightweight boots barely touching the floor.

"This is the sixteen year old," one said softly. "The other aged candidate." the other stated. Both examined him with open curiosity or maybe wariness. Sagiri nodded. His birthday was still a month away but in a sense he was already sixteen. he had always felt much older than his age.

"This way." it seemed there were other candidates like Jalume had mentioned and they were being kept apart. They moved swiftly and he followed them closely. As they approached the citadel, a prickling sensation crawled across his skin. The Citadel was calling to the archive inside of him. It was calling onto it like the frame sigil had. His power, which had been dormant since the journey started inside of him. Not now, he thought trying to control the power he yet could not understand. It didn't stop it or listen to him, it stirred beneath his ribs like a waking ember. Two other Guards waited at the entrance of the Hall region, armor glowing with soft, ember-like runes.

"Aged candidate," one announced. They Guards held another set of signal rods. It seems some students carried cheating materials. They let out a screeching sound when they came close to his oru-shells.

"What are those?" they asked suspiciously.

"My hearing aid." He said. "I have a hearing problem."

"Take them off. You cannot enter the exam hall with any ornaments." The power inside of him was stirring too much and then telling him to remove the oru-shells was like telling him to walk into a danger zone without a weapon. He had adjusted one ear so he could hear Jalume, the warden and the marshal along the way and it was already too much.

"I can not do that," he said. His voice came out harsh and cold. "I use them to hear," he lied. Their job was the opposite but they did not need to know that. If he took them off then he could fall straight to the one pulling the strings. He needed to hold the power back and not lose control at any point.

"His core temperature fluctuates strangely," one guard whispered. Sagiri met his exposed eyes calmly.

"I am nervous." He answered. The guard stared at him for a long moment. For some reason he felt uneasy and nervous. He had whispered to his partner and yet he had heard him. They both stared at him for another moment then nodded.

"Proceed."

Chapter 10: Chapter 10: THE EXAM II

The exam hall was big enough to fit a thousand people or more. It was more like an arena. Sagiri's feet echoed as he walked into the arena. Sits were arranged three feet apart in each direction. No one else was sitting in the exam hall and no one welcomed sagiri as he entered. His steps though silent as he walks down the space between the seats, echoed loudly filling the empty room. The silence however was much welcomed and the turmoil stirring in his chest calmed down. It was as if the room was made to silence every outside noise and even the inner turmoil. He could have sat at the back but he kept walking covering the room half way. He sank slowly into a chair and faced the front. The room is square with barren stone walls on all sides. Nothing happens for another half an hour and sagiri falls into a premeditative sleep. His back straight and hands perfectly resting on his laps.

"Your exam starts now." A voice said next to him and his eyes snapped open instantly. It is the first time he did not perceive someone approaching. A middle young woman was standing in front of him with an exam paper.

"You have two hours." she said, handing sagiri an exam paper with his name seal on it. He laid it gently on the desk before raising his head again. When he lifted his head again to ask for a pen, however, the woman was already gone and a pen was perfectly laid out in front of him. His mouth hung open in astonishment. He had never encountered anyone whose steps he could hear or whose presence he could not perceive.

Her clan or secret tribal art must have been in his locked part of the archive. She bore no tribe tattoo on her skin. For the first time in his life he felt powerless. Perhaps he had been wrong to think he could perceive everyone's presence.

The room was back to silence again and he focused his eyes on the question paper. It was questions about history, political strategies and tribal traditions all written in different five national languages of Tagayia. Having lived in a small village, if he was a normal kid he could have only been able to speak at least two languages. Rusha taught him the eastern tribe's Sulari tongue, and Bakuru taught him the central plains tongue is the Keshu dialect. He already understood both languages long before they could teach him but he acted as if he didn't know them already to avoid making them worry. They always acted more and more worried every time he developed a new sense.

He answered the questions in Sulari tongue and Keshu dialect perfectly but wrote half bad and half good on the Tagayia language which was derived from all tribes and used in all high schools more than the other four. For the questions asked in the western tribes Wenji speech he answered them below average pretending to only understand basic sentences and for the questions written in the north Korun tongue he left them open. He did not want to appear too smart and not stupid either. When the two hours elapsed the woman appeared again to pick the answer sheet and again sagiri couldn't perceive her arrival.

"What are you?!" He snapped when she stood in front of him. Her hair was cleanly shaved and she wore a flowing garment that swept behind her. Sagiri could not hide the fact that she pissed him off. What is so special about her that I can't hear her movements and perceive her emotions? Her eyes also seemed empty and sagiri could not hear any form of life coming from her.

"Your next exam is in the silent arena." She said as if she hadn't heard him at all.

"You are not alive...?!" sagiri went to ask but she was already gone. That is the strangest thing he had ever experienced in his life. A human without life. What is she? He was still wondering when a direction marshal came to show him to the silent exam arena. The one he was just in was already silent and he wondered how silent an arena had to be to be called silent. His question was answered soon after when he was shown to a small cubical room. It was 10 square feet on all sides and painted black. Only a table sat in front of him and two sitting mats on both sides. The same girl from before was sitting on the opposite side staring at what was on the table. Two glasses were laid out and a colorless liquid was filled half full in each one. The door shut behind him and he soon understood why it was called a silent room. Noise was completely cut out and no air could come in or flow outside. It was a small airtight prison and the archive inside of him did not like it at all. The fire somewhere behind his chest circled dangerously, hating being caged.

"Sit." he voice said, looking at him as empty as before.

"Let me out!" he snapped, losing control. He had thought that outside noise was overwhelming but the artificial silence in the small room was even worse than noise. His pupils dilated, the whites disappearing rapidly. They always went all black with no whites when he was in distress or lost control and he was close to losing it. He shut his eyes but that made it worse.

"This exam is short," the woman started and he regained control for a second, her voice filling the silent void. "I am Kiana." She continued with the same tone pointing to the other mat. Sagiri looked at her warily for a second before moving to sit his nerves on edge and he glared at her. She however seemed unaffected waiting for him to sit.

"In front of you are two glasses with different fluids. One is lethal poison and the other is water. You only have to pick one first and I pick the remaining to drink. After we drink the door will open automatically," she explained as if she was describing the weather. It was as if she did not understand a lethal poison was in one of the glasses and they all could possibly die.

"What?!" Sagiri snapped standing to his feet. The ancient power inside of him was burning uneasy. It hated being confined in the small space. With every second that passed the whispers in his head grew louder, whispering things he could not understand. He could feel the marks on his body slithering under his skin and he hissed smashing his fists into the wall. It did not dent however and instead his fists bled. It was truly a prison.

"The air in the room is also limited to ten minutes and four have gone by already. If you don't pick a cup at the end of the ten minutes we all die," she added the last piece of information calmly, still sitting as poised as from the start. Her mouth opened again and Sagiri wondered if it could get any worse. "This room is also made from the hardest stone to exist and it can not be forced open. It can only be opened from the outside."

It did get worse like he thought.

The last piece of information hit him like a punch to the gut and he froze. He did not understand the intention of the test or what it required from him or if the person behind the scenes who brought him to the city wanted him dead, but one thing was for sure, if he did not chose one drink they would all die from suffocation, and if he did chose a drink one of them could surely die. There was no easy way out. It was a choice between to kill them both or kill one of them. Sagiri thought he understood the world from what he knew from the archive inside of him, yet in that moment he felt so naive. On the other hand he could unleash what was inside of him and see if it could break the door but if it was a plan devised by the person hunting him then he could fall right into his plan.

He sank down to the mat slowly, his eyes shut tight. He could pick one drink and hope it's water but that meant killing an innocent girl. He might have not sensed life from her but he had smelled death on her either. Maybe she just had a way to conceal her presece. On top of that if he failed to choose before time ran out they would both die.

He had to pick first according to the requirements and that meant her life was in his hands whatever choice he made. He had never killed a person before and the ancient power inside of him raged harder responding to his distress.

'Think! Think sagiri! Think! What could Rasha or Bakuru do in this situation! What can you do!' he chanted in his head like a mantra. "Sometimes you don't have to think too much before you act, just act" Rasha's words came rushing to his mind and it was too late to stop the stupid idea that struck his mind. His hands moved fast as the last minute tickled down. They moved fast, not allowing him to think. In a moment he grabbed both the drinks, poured them into one and chugged them down. He just hoped the water could neutralize the poison or else his life, his so far blind life he had led, had come to an end.

The girl gasped as she watched him drink them both in horror. It was the only reaction she gave since they met. The moment Sagiri juggled the two liquids it didn't take long for his muscles to lose control and he fell to the ground with a thud and everything went dark.