

THE LAST KEEPER

#Chapter 21: TENSION - Read THE LAST KEEPER Chapter 21: TENSION

Chapter 21: Chapter 21: TENSION

Agony exploded in his skull. His knees buckled so violently his tray clattered across the polished floor. He slammed onto the ground with a strangled gasp. His knees met the cold, hard floor but he didn't feel it. The pain was not in his body but a searing headache had hit him deep in his skull making him fall forward. It was the archive again, and it was tearing through his skull. It was the same as what had happened after the fight when captain salka and his men had been in a fight. This time he had not been triggered by the sight of blood however. He could feel it now, a faint internal hum, like a current running along the edges of his bones. When he had passed out in the Second Year Library, exhaustion had knocked him out cold, yet, the moment he woke up, he could feel it, the subtle recoil of power as though the Archive inside him had been momentarily refilled.

He didn't understand the entirety of what had happened then. He thought the warmth he felt before was just from the sleep recharging his strength. But now it seemed like something more had happened. The archive had done something else while he was out cold. Sagiri clawed at the floor, breath ripping in and out in short, broken bursts. White hot electric pulses shot behind his eyes, down his spine, and into his teeth. It felt as if someone had cracked his skull open and poured fire directly into his brain. It took all he had not to let himself surrender to the markings that were slithering under his skin.

He screamed.

Not a dignified sound, a raw, involuntary, humiliating cry of agony. Gasps echoed around him. Benches screeched as students leapt to their feet. They had always been trained to be alert and a student suddenly falling to the ground and crying in pain put everyone on edge. While he rolled and crawled within the alley between tables, his face came face to face with big boots which he crushed into violently head first.

The figure he crashed into was still seated still devouring his mountain that doubled everyone's, sagiri had just happened to fall by his table disturbing his meal. He was now standing tall, towering and immovable staring down at the writhing boy. Sagiri still remembered the feelings he perceived from the person in front of him. He had been on his knees by his boots in the morning assembly and all he could perceive from him was confidence, pride and strength and also disappointment.

The feeling of disappointment was even bigger now. King Bami, is what they called him, he was the king of not only Galka War Academy but also the Northern Tribes. His father is The Grand Zorath of the north and he wanted to take after him fare and square by

proving himself worthy. Kaka Asakana Bami of the Bami clan. Also the school's strongest. The other survivor of the suffocation chamber test, and the absolute last person Sagiri wanted to collapse in front of. He might have fallen into the bottom of the food chain since he left Wuzi but he was not planning to stay at the bottom for long, he also was prideful and had gotten used to being different and knowing more than everyone, so that he had gotten used to it. Some part of him wanted that back.

The room went silent watching their king on the spot with the new boy again. He had not been pleased to learn that someone else had conquered the suffocation chamber, he had been eager to meet the protegee who had stood on the same light as him. Yet he had been utterly disappointed when he had met him. He couldn't stand anymore to be compared to such a person who the two times they met was on his knees. It angered him to know that such weakness could share the light with him. Then Kaka's body suddenly jolted. His back arched slightly, muscles tightening as though he'd been struck by an invisible whip. He took a step back and stared at the groaning boy wearily not understanding the slight jolt of currency he had just felt. Students shouted. Chairs overturned thinking it was a fight. But, because no one had seen what truly happened, they stood in confusion when they saw the new boy groaning.

The Archive, in its wild, uncontrolled state earlier while he was passed out, had reached out reacting to Sagiri's proximity, his collapse, his overload of force-fed knowledge. When Sagiri had fallen asleep on the book, when exhaustion had shut down his body, The Archive had kept going. It had absorbed the entire theory textbook on Terrain Advantage in one ravenous sweep. And now it was detonating inside him, overflowing, rejecting its own speed, its own hunger. It might have part of its locked ability that had broken through once again. The barrier in his archive caused him pain whenever the barrier was pushed.

"Stay back..."He tried to gasp out a warning

But the sentence broke apart as another wave of pain folded him onto his head, much worse than the last. Instructors burst through the hall doors in a hurry after hearing the commotion. The fourth year students would still be considered deadly weapons and if allowed to go out of control they could topple a small city by themselves if left to their own devices. Instructors were not only there to teach but to keep them in check. Four Junior combat instructors were the first to reach them, sliding across the floor in trained, efficient motions.

"What happened?!" the first asked.

"Who attacked him?" the third asked.

"Which student is responsible for this?!" the first repeated himself.

Hands seized Sagiri's shoulders. Rough. Urgent. He tried to shake his head but he was in too much pain and couldn't form words. His body was locked in a violent tremor,

every nerve firing at once. An instructor barked, to Kaka who was the closest and who was the only one in a defensive position after a weird sensation he experienced

"Cadet Kaka! You are under disciplinary action for assault during meal protocol!" Sagiri's eyes widened.

Sagiri tried to shout No! tried to explain, tried to say It wasn't him but just trying to open his mouth made him feel like he could shatter into a thousand pieces. It wasn't anyone, it was the Archive. Kaka's face contorted into anger, confusion and fury at the accusation. How could anyone ever think the boy was even worthy of his attention. Insinuating he could lower himself to beat a boy weaker than him was the biggest insult he has ever endured. Hands were already hauling Sagiri upward to help him stand when the next command rang through the hall.

"Kaka asakana to the suspended chamber for twenty four hours."

The dining wing went still. Kaka froze mid-breath, shoulders rising and falling with the sharp, residual pain coursing through him. His eyes snapped open wide, burning, furious. He jerked out of a junior instructor's grip with a violent twist of his wrists.

"No." His voice cut through the hall like a blade.

The instructor tried to hold him again with the help of another, but King Bami shoved them back as if they warranted a whole rank ahead of him. He was a beast in strength.

"I said no."

There was a collective intake of breath. No student ever refused an order from an instructor, not openly.

"Kaka," barked another junior instructor, stepping forward, "are you trying to disobey?"

"I didn't touch him." Kaka growled, His stance widened, instinctive, protective, the way fighters anchored themselves before a clash. Before the instructors could respond, another figure moved behind Bami, a head shorter but now he looked dead serious, not like the playful boy he had met in the morning, his athletic shoulders broad and rigid. Kiuga.

King Bami's closest friend and the only boy whose strength was rumored to rival him even if they stood far apart in size. Kiuga, stepped in without a word, planting himself directly behind Kaka, forming a two man team. Several students gasped. The tension spiked up a notch and even being held up by the fourth instructor and being in excruciating pain Sagiri could feel the dangerous calmness the two boys exuded. They were willing to fight even an instructor to prove their innocence. And Kiuga was willing to support his friend through thick and thin, what loyalty. He wished he could have a friend who understood him. who he could share his secrets with.

"Stand down," The same junior instructor said again. He seemed to be the brave one of the three "Now." However, Kaka didn't move.

"He didn't do it," Kiuga said with a deep voice different from the one he had used to tease king bami in the morning assembly.

"King Bami..." the instructor called him by his nickname but it was too late to take it back

"I'm not going to the suspended chamber for a lie." Kaka said coolly, his voice cold and a storm brewed behind his pupils.

The three instructors shifted into defensive stances. Two more moved in on Kaka's flanks.

Every boy in the dining hall fell silent but some brimmed with excitement wanting to see who could win between kaka, Kiuga and the junior instructors. Instructors didn't fear students on the regular. Except perhaps the two standing before them. The air vibrated with the tension of a war, one wrong twitch and the entire hall would explode. Sagiri, slumped to the floor as another wave of agony tore through his skull and he gasped uselessly. The instructors prepared to subdue Bami and Kiuga by force. Kiuga curled and skulked low, getting into a frog pose and Kaka just stood still as if waiting for someone to make a move so he could have an excuse to break them in half. The tension had swollen to a suffocating level and electricity cackled. Suddenly when it got too much to bear adding to Sagiri's suffering the doors thundered open and a presence stepped in.

The hall straightened immediately.

Chapter 22: Chapter 22: THE GAME

Sagiri felt captain salka before he saw him. The man's presence was always so domineering. He was even more feared than the discipline instructor. All the boys got into their most salute position, hands to their chest except of course Kaka, Kiuga and the instructors who were having a standoff. Sagiri was still in pain so he couldn't move. Salka's eyes swept the chaos, Sagiri almost unconscious and trembling, king Bami braced for a fight, instructors stiff with readiness, students white-faced and holding breath. Salka's voice was deep, steady, impossible to disobey when he spoke.

"Cadet Kaka, stand down!" Kaka did not turn however because he was still watching his sides. Salka walked closer until his shadow fell over them. "I know you are not lying." he added and the entire hall exhaled. "Now stand down all of you!" he repeated and everyone slowly fell into a salute stance, fists to chest, even the junior instructors. Kaka slowly, reluctantly, lowered his fists. The instructors visibly eased but stayed alert.

"All of you step out." Salka continued, The room cleared in seconds leaving just the three boys, the junior instructors and Sagiri. who was now being held up by Lotaga who

he hadn't noticed was behind Salka. King Bami's eyes flicked to Sagiri, and rage simmered behind his eyes. He was still angry at being accused.

"And cadet Kaka?" one instructor asked, carefully.

"He receives no punishment. He did not falsify his defense." Captain Salka's answer was firm, absolute. A ripple of shock passed through the hall. Salka turned his attention to Kiuga.

"You as well." Kiuga saluted and bowed his head immediately.

"However," Captain Salka continued, voice sharpening, "any further disobedience from any of you will result in consequences for your entire temporary units. This school does not reward unnecessary chaos. Kiuga and Kaka you will stand on your hands till class begins for causing disturbance, junior instructors wait for me in the disciplinary room, in the central pentagon wing" Kaka and Kiuga accepted that with a stiff nod. Before they got on their hands, legs suspended in the air as if it was the easiest thing they had ever done. Without further undo Captain Salka hooked a hand around Sagiri's waist and carried him like a bag.

"I thought you were only triggered at the sight of blood?" Captain Salka asked as he walked through several corridors. He didn't seem to feel his weight at all as he walked at a normal pace. The pain in his skull had begun to dwindle but he was already tired again. The archive tied him out whenever it absorbed information just like the identity frame. The central wing was just as quietly busy as always with instructors going in and out. Captain Salka took him to the medical wing and Lotaga had disappeared midway.

"I am feeling better now" Sagiri said but Captain Salka ignored him.

"What is wrong with you?" Captain Salka asked once he dumped him on a medical bed beckoning a healer over to them. "Check him?" he said to the healer before his eyes now narrowed zeroed back on Sagiri waiting for an answer. Silence prevailed however as they watched the healer work and checked his pulse.

"He is healthy apart from his slightly faster than normal heartbeat." the healer said, saluting slightly before leaving.

"That did not seem like nothing at all. Now speak and if you lie you are going to the suspension chamber." Salka said eyes narrowed. Sagiri knew that if he told the truth he would be possibly going to put his life in danger. He did not know who to trust yet. And if he told lies he was going to the suspension chamber. If Kaka was ready to fight than go to the suspension chamber, then it must be a hellhole. He had already been punished twice and he did not want any more punishment. So he chose the middle, a polished lie that was partly true.

"You won't tell anyone." he started and Captain Salka nodded after a while.

"If it is not something that is contagious or poses danger to the galka war academy then it's fine. If it is then I will break you in half myself." captain salka said and sagiri could only feel honesty. He seemed like the man who meant what he said and did not have time to sugarcoat or lie. He was neither sly or malicious. He was just deadly in battle. If Sagiri ever needed to have an ally by his side he could choose someone like him. He was someone who could be a good ally or the worst enemy, sagiri shattered remembering how quickly moved and killed. Definitely, the worst enemy one could possibly have.

"Now start talking."

"Well its true blood triggers my headaches," sagiri said. "But that is not the only thing, my brain just works faster than others and I can read what others read in weeks in just a day and remember all of it. Today I missed breakfast and I might have chewed more than I could swallow earlier on an empty stomach. When I ate, my memory of everything I read while I was hungry just started rewriting itself in my brain too quickly." he finished and Salka's expression had changed from that of anger to interest. It was a lie but it was the closest to the truth. He couldn't possibly say. *'I have an archive inside of me that is hungry for knowledge and it absorbed an entire book while i passed out and it only started to rewrite them to memory after i ate and it hurts because there seemed to be a barrier in the archive'*

"Interesting. Why do you want to keep that a secret?"

"People don't like different people and me being an intruder has already caused too much hostility. "Sagiri said but he just did not want his benefactor to get wind of his abilities yet.

"They will eventually know. It is not something to hide if you are a genius."

"I know, but..."

"Having a brain like that will be to your advantage, boy, it will even earn you respect, besides Galka is not short of geniuses, most will be satisfied to know that you earned the position because of your head and you are not completely useless."

"Our boys are not just raised to be battle weapons, they love a challenge and you should make a few friends too. Now leave and don't read more than your brain can handle again, I don't want to keep babysitting you." Salka added showing him to the door. "Your uniforms will be ready the day after tomorrow. Those clothes of yours are an eye sore" Salka said in disgust as sagiri walked out. He really hated his attire.

By the time sagiri got to the fourth year pentagon the 12 to 4 class had already started, it involved advanced tactics, team command, multi weapon theory and battle field simulations. They changed between the four depending on the day. Today was the team command unit and they were in the arena waiting for the team command

instructor. Sagiri was only required to watch for this class to understand the rules so he could join in the next one. Most fourth year classes did not have theoretical units, most were practical. The instructor was dressed in a blue combat uniform and a blue overcoat. Her sash is gold-edged black for senior instructors. She is miss Lakiya saninka of the saninka clan of the Teshini tribe of the west.

"Move it penguins!" Miss Lakiya yelled, and students started to run laps around the arena. She looked like a model standing in the middle of the court with her PE costume. She could only be from the Teshini tribe and her figure was all too telling. The Teshini tribe of the west prided themselves on coming from a line of warriors. Even as Tagayia modernized most of them still joined military oriented schools and they prided themselves in being fit.

She was tall, standing at 1.82 meters. Her hair was cleanly shaven and in its place a tribal mark of an arrow was imprinted. In the middle of her forehead was a black circular shield branded into her skin. She was so beautiful that it made one want to take a knee and call her queen. It might have been so in the past that her tribe ruled the tribes of the west and if the world wasn't modernizing she could be some kun or a chief's wife.

(Kun_ A queen/ wife of a chief or Nginka)

Nginka_ Ruler of tribes_ they still held power in their respective tribes but they didn't really hold power in the present world. Even so they have a say in the kaya

Kaya_ the traditional Parliament)

Miss Lakiya didn't even wait for them to catch our breath after ten rounds before she split them into a game of hunters and prey. There was an evil glimmer in her eyes when she announced the game.

"Gather up into two teams. The class 4A, 4B and 4C will be the prey and class 4D and 4E will be the hunters." Classes were split in four for lessons that required large spaces to be effective but almost all lessons were taught in none. She clapped her hands loudly. The voice echoed with command and the students cheered at the arrangement. She always loved the game of hunter and prey since she was from the western tribes. The western tribes however raised their daughters to be equal to their male counterparts unlike the north who raised men to be warriors and women to be docile. The best hunters became the queen or King. Strength mattered in the west, not gender. Unlike in the north where only strength mattered and only men fought. They however still prided in their women who only prided themselves in marrying and giving birth to the strongest men. It was also a known fact that Miss Lakiya always took every moment to assert her dominance above all men and she didn't look like one who could cower. She always rose to the occasion if she sensed the chauvinistic bastards try to defy her. She was among the few female instructors in the Galka war school.

"May the game begin!"

Chapter 23: Chapter 23: THE GAME II

"Let the game begin!" The air cackled with tension to the point of bursting into flames at the announcement. A moment of silence passed and nobody moved. Every hunter's eyes locked on their prey. The most menacing of all is Kaka Asakana of the Asakana clan of the North. He is built like a tank and his two tribal braids are tied in a kahu shell at the ends falling down to his upper back. Everyone knew his tribe was the most brutal of all in the north and they hoped not to be tackled by him. There were a total of 249 boys spread out in the large arena, there used to be 250 boys but something happened to one thus the vacancy for sagiri. He is the former holder of room 246 that now belongs to sagiri. With Sagiri the number of boys was now back to 250 but he was not required to play this game and just watch. More so after his breakdown earlier there was no chance he could join. The hunters down to 99 and prey a staggering 150. The hunters had to take down at least two prey. Kaka was on the hunters team and just his presence almost made the prey's number shrink. Tisiki Ochago of the central plain and the best war equipment innovator and Aayu Asari the 4E class representative and from the upper north are the wardens. They stand on two sides of the arena forming a triangle with two Ukis behind them. All the prey team stand at the starting Uki looking as tense as possible.

(Uki- Corner.)

After a second of hesitation and delay Tisiki released the ball to the other end to Asari with all his strength. Hell broke loose as the game of Takido officially began.

(Takido- a game children play but made more intense by added rules and awards when it was incorporated into the system. It is called Akido outside of the curriculum)

The small round mass moved at a speed visible to the naked eye. According to the rules of the game a prey could only move when the ball was in the air. By the time the ball landed on the warden's hands they had to be in their Ukis which served as shelter. Anyone slow enough to not be in a shelter was easy prey and could be tapped out. Meaning they had been disqualified. Anyone who didn't change Ukis after the ball was passed four times was also disqualified. Any hunter without a prey after four passes was also disqualified. That only meant that Tisiki and Asari had to throw the ball as hard as possible to reduce the time from one Uki to another.

Kaka and Kiuga were strategically positioned beside the Ukis to tackle anyone who hadn't made it when the ball landed. At the speed in which the ball was thrown however it required so much speed for one to make it before the ball touched the other side. A warden could also use the ball to eliminate prey but if he misses then it could backfire. The prey were still fourth years and trained for three years so it wasn't going to be easy. They moved so fast between the Uki and most made it before the ball landed. They were basically flying, not even touching the ground. Sagiri was impressed, he had a long way to go before he could move like that. If he was in the game then he could have been eliminated on the first try. Those unlucky enough not to have made it before the

ball landed and to avoid the hunters to save themselves however did not stand a chance. Kaka sprang his movements so quickly for the eye. He tackled two guys at the same time smashing them to the ground with too much force that the ground shook.

He moved almost as fast as captain salka and to think he was only a fourth year cadet it was truly scary. All the guys in the arena had trained for the same number of years but the difference in strength was just too wide. The bami tribe and more so the asakana clan were beasts of battle. Maybe that is why they had hated captain salka on his journey to galka and wanted to kill him. The man was a whole battalion by himself now imagining two or three of them in the battlefield at the same time it could just be futile to try and win.

"Remember the class is to show you how to work in teams and how to lead one." Miss Lakiya announced after seeing the brutal display of power from Kaka. Asari released the ball with all his strength too. He had caught the ball mid air and he spun, twisting his hand back to add momentum before he released it again. Almost too quickly not giving the prey the chance to catch their breath. The two wardens were protected by two each side to catch the ball if it flew outside of their reach but it was completely unnecessary seeing how good they were at catching the ball. It appeared as if it wasn't the first time Miss Lakiya had made them play. Kaka was a whole battalion in himself and after six passes he had eliminated twenty by himself and Kiuga was having too much and eliminated ten. Some hunters were too slow to move before kaka Kiuga and other good ones which forced them to get eliminated. They did not have any team work at all. Some prey were too scared to move fearing to be body slammed by kaka and the game was moving too quickly. Twenty hunters and seven prey remained and when Tisiki released the ball again using all his might making sure it only stayed for a few seconds in the air the seven were eliminated at once. The last being N'varu Neni. He made it to the Uki but one was too few against twenty of so he forfeited.

"No teamwork at all." instructor Lakiya started, "Now exchange roles, the hunter is prey and vice versa. Get in position!" she announced and the two teams took position most willing to revenge.

No rules forbade violence and the game had barely started but Kaka in his haste to move fast he made sure to throw one hunter so far he landed with a thud sliding on the sliding surface. He didn't care as he flew so fast and he arrived at his Uki before the ball could land. He was a beast. After the ball touched one of the wardens' hands the hunters chased the prey and the only safe place for those who didn't make it to Uki was in the cage where if the ball touched you, you were disqualified. But with the number of hunters this time being staggeringly more than the prey that was not an option. That only worked when the number of players was few

(Cage-just between the two who wielded the ball at the Centre)

The warden of the hunters team released the ball again but not to the other wardens this time, instead he propelled in the air as if to throw a fake pass and when the prey

made a move he released it aiming for them just like aiming at a target in the dark. Since they were men he could be lucky. That was a bold move. The ball hit one of the class 4D prey square in the head eliminating him. But his aim must have been lethal because the ball bounced off and hit the one and only Kaka Asakana. He was already at the safety of the Uki but that didn't stop him from looking at him like he had committed the worst crimes of all.

"Thlaka!" He bellowed his lips pulled behind his teeth in a snarl. His voice shook the whole court. His eyes landed on the warden in a melting glare. He shuddered in fear and sagiri could smell fear coming from the arena. Some from the warden and some from his team.

(Thlaka- a curse word in the north especially also it sounds like kalaka which is a woman who hasn't achieved womanhood in the east.)

"Kaka! Watch your language or I'll disqualify you!" Miss Lakiya called him out, adding salt to the injury. Did she want him to kill someone or something? Leave it to Miss Lakiya to call anyone to order.

The other released the ball again and in the other direction and Kaka moved to the other Uki which put him in the Uki closest to the warden who had hit him. He did move when again even when he released the ball to the other maybe the warden didn't notice but sagiri saw kaka sink so low in his stance when the ball was released again. he tried to jump high to catch it like always but he was really bad at environment awareness, in that moment when the ball almost touched his palm something moved in a blur catching the ball midair. It was of course Kaka Asakana. The rule of the game is, the ball is a weapon to eliminate prey but if the hunters threw the ball outside the center without an aim of elimination and it landed in the prey's hands. Well, the prey who caught it could use it to eliminate one hunter and it could give him an additional life. The move was risky because if you missed the ball or it hit you, you were disqualified. But leave it to Kaka to defy the odds. The ball wasn't off but he had exploited his physical prowess to cover so much distance in one long calculated leap to catch the ball. Only sagiri and kiuga had seen him prepare for the execution and it was immaculate.

There was a moment of silence as the tables turned for a moment. Everyone knew the amount of power Kaka wielded and even if the ball was the size of a fist, he was going to make sure to make it hurt as much as possible. None of the students had the power to predict the future but they all hundred percent without a doubt knew the ball was going to land on the warden who had hit him accidentally. That is how unforgiving kaka was and sagiri wondered what he was going to do to him after the punishment he received during lunch hour and more so he had distracted his meal. He could only brace himself and wait or pay with something.

Everyone held their breath and sagiri could even hear the synchronized heartbeats. Kaka jumped two good feet in the air like a trained warrior which everyone knew he was because every northern tribe had to teach their young men the art of war since they

were old enough to walk, to know that they were warriors and protectors of the tribes. That tradition hadn't died down yet.

Kaka moved to the Centre of the cage, not too far but not too close to allow him to execute what he planned. He sank low and jumped fast and high. His sculpted built and swift body floated in the air for a second before he spun around in a good 270 degrees. He stretched his right hand as far back as it could go while his two feet curled backwards to add momentum to his throw. His every move was calculated for perfect execution and annihilation. Just when he was about to land his head turned at an angle to look at the before he swung and released the ball.

The ball made a tearing sound through the air as it tore through every particle of dust and air as it moved in a supersonic speed towards me. Everyone gasped as they watched in horror as the ball flew towards the warden who had curled his body in a defensive position to reduce the impact. Nothing could have stopped that ball at the speed it had been released. The ball was too fast for anyone to block anyway. A mini moment passed before the sound came.

Thud!!

Silence!!

The boy fell to the ground and wailed in pain. Kaka was so cruel. There was no rule in how much force one could use and he had exploited that to his fullest. Even in his defensive position data had aimed for his acupoint and with military precision bringing him to the ground.

"Kaka disqualified!" Instructor Lakiya announced and more silence fell in the room. "Not for how you play or for injuring your classmate but for the reason you did it. It was personal." Kaka glared at her before he walked out of the arena. Not even a woman was excluded from her glare.

"The game continues!" Miss Lakiya yelled again, not missing a heartbeat.

Chapter 24: Chapter 24: VITAL

The game was slowed down a bit without Kaka, but even so, class 4E was still the strongest class, and they still won. Sagiri had never seen a childhood game played with so much vigor. Even so, the next class could be on the basics of weapon handling. The dagger training grounds sat on the outer nonagon, a circular yard of packed earth and wooden racks lined with straw human-shaped dummies. The air smelled of earth and steel. Sagiri arrived on time, having left before the team training class ended. Instructor Rana stood waiting under the shade of the weapons shed. He was the shortest of the instructors, but thick-shouldered. He was the best with daggers, and at his height, stabbing and slicing a taller opponent gave him an advantage. Sagiri moved and stopped right in front of the man who was almost the same height as him. His hair was

tied to the back of his head before it was pulled into a braided bun. He tossed Sagiri a short dagger with Black hilt. It was already unsheathed, and it lacked any sharpness. It was just a blunt training blade. Cold metal.

"Fourth-year cadets start with dual knives handling," Bekuro Dalimba said, "but you? You will start from the very basics." Sagiri nodded, gripping the dagger and wrapping his hand on it like you would a knife when cutting a fruit.

"Wrong," Bekuro Dalimba snapped instantly. He stepped behind Sagiri and adjusted his fingers one by one. Until the dagger was facing backwards, the blade hidden behind his arm, aligning it perfectly with the forearm, with only the tip showing, "You have to hold it with your whole hand, lock your hand around the hilt, and make sure it is aligned with the forearm. A dagger is not a toy. It is an extension of your intent."

Sagiri swallowed. "Yes."

"Now sink low and stay in a horse stance with your lower left leg forward and your left hand open in front of you. Then move with your right leg, which is holding the dagger, and simultaneously move the hand wielding the dagger to form a perfect elbow, and your dagger will naturally face forward in a slashing and stabbing motion." He demonstrated two more times in clean and sharp movements before turning around to face Sagiri.

"Show me your stance." Sagiri widened his legs awkwardly, dropping his shoulders, mimicking the instructor's stance.

"One thing worse than a weak fighter," Instructor Bekuro Dalimba muttered, watching him make an awkward stance, "is a clumsy one." He kicked Sagiri's right heel inward. Pulled his left arm close. Pressed his shoulder down.

"Listen carefully, Recruit. There are three primary dagger stances. You will memorize them before the hour ends ."

He moved to the front and demonstrated. "The first is the guarded stance, your feet and shoulders should be at the same width. The hand holding your knife should be close to your heart in this stance. This is used for defense, unlike the one I just showed you, which is for attacking." He raised his blade vertically, elbow tucked, body tight.

"Remember to breathe regularly. Holding your breath will only make you breathless in a real fight." Sagiri mirrored him, breaths shallow and controlled. He repeated the stance half a dozen times before Instructor Bekuro started explaining the next stance.

"The second stance is called the forward stance. It is almost like the first one I showed you, but now, while advancing." Instructor Bekuro stepped sharply forward, blade pointing outward like a spear. "This one is for advancing. It requires balance, your front leg should carry ninety percent of your weight with your heel pushed in to add

momentum to the front leg for maximum damage when you stab." He tapped Sagiri's knee until Sagiri bent into the correct posture.

"Good. This is the stance for silent moving and killing."

Without warning, Instructor Bekuro flipped the dagger downward, blade pointing from the bottom of his fist, and directly pointed it at Sagiri's throat. He had barely seen the man move, and if this was a real fight, he could without a doubt be dead.

"This is the reverse grip stance," he explained, "it is the best in close combat for close killing." Sagiri felt cold running down his back. Rana's voice was level when he continued. "You use reverse when your target is too close to miss. It is the best for slashing arteries, piercing kidneys, or sometimes ending what is already dying." He demonstrated a few times before asking Sagiri to mimic the grip.

Sagiri repeated the three stances till his shoulders and arms ached. He collected his stances now and then until he was satisfied before he led him to the row of straw human forms scattered across the circular clearing. They were shaped crudely but marked with red paint over the neck, ribs, stomach, and back to show vital points.

"The areas marked with red paint are the Vital points of the human body," Instructor Bekuro echoed what Sagiri was already thinking. "Learn them and memorize them all like the back of your hand. If possible, mark them on your own body because a successful attack depends on them. It won't matter how fast and strong you are, if you miss the opponent's vital points, you will be the one dead." He pointed at the throat. "One cut here and the windpipe collapses." Then he pointed at the collarbone. "Slide the blade under this bone, and the whole arm is rendered useless. It ends its strength immediately." His finger chapped in between where the drawn, straw ribs outline was. "Between the third and fourth rib lies the heart. One stab here and the opponent is dead. He circled the straw, and Sagiri followed. Two marks glared on the lower back. "Here are the Kidneys. One accurate stub and they collapse."

"Next is the inner thigh. I don't advise you to go for this point with a stronger opponent, but if you get a hit, then they bleed out in seconds." Sagiri stared at the red marks, carefully. Rasha had tried to teach him about medicine and where the veins were situated in the human body in case he wanted to save a patient's life. Yet here he was learning how to take a life. He was conversant with parts of the human body from Rasha. Sagiri was still lost in thought when Instructor Bekuro shoved a training dagger into his hand.

"Stab." Sagiri hesitated. Instructor Bekuro's tone sharpened. "This is not murder. This is survival, kill or be killed. Imagine an enemy in front of you." Sagiri inhaled once, braced himself, stepped into the forward stance, and struck. All he could imagine was his faceless benefactor. The dagger punched into the straw chest with a dry crunch. His arms shivered from the impact, but he kept his grip. The straws were surprisingly thick. Rana nodded once.

"Again in the three stances I just taught you." Sagiri pulled the blade free and stabbed the rib mark.

"Again."

Throat.

"Again."

Kidney.

Sweat dripped down Sagiri's face. His arms burned. His breath trembled. But he kept going: stab, pull, step back. Stab, pull, pivot. Stab, slash, retreat.

"Good," Instructor Bekuro finally said. He grabbed Sagiri's chin and forced him to look up. "But you're holding back."

Sagiri blinked. "I..."

"No excuses. You still have some fear of hurting someone. That fear must die before the year ends." Instructor Bekuro shoved him toward another dummy.

"This time," he said quietly, "stab as if the dummy wants to take your life. I want to see intent in your movements." Sagiri lifted the blade. His breathing steadied. He stepped in and closed his eyes to catch his breath before he struck. This time, the strike was clean, sharp, decisive. The straw dummy jolted from the force. The power inside him had stirred a portion of killing intent leaking through to him. He gasped and staggered back. He must have gotten so carried away, he forgot to keep it in check. Instructor Bekuro didn't smile, but he didn't correct him either for staggering back.

"Good," he said. "Now practice the sequence. Throat. Heart. Kidney. Retreat." Sagiri obeyed.

By the end of the second hour, Sagiri's hands shook. His shoulders ached. His breath tasted like iron. Instructor Bekuro had not asked him to stop, just watching and nodding now and then or shaking his head. When he messed up even a step, Instructor Bekuro stood behind him and corrected the smallest error in his steps.

"Center your weight."

"Don't raise your elbow."

"Too slow."

"Rotate the wrist."

"Recover faster."

"Good...again," was all he kept repeating as sweat poured down Sagiri's face. He was lucky he didn't participate in instructor Lakiya's class because then he could have not made it throw basic weapon handling techniques. Even so, Sagiri felt half-dead, but something else burned inside him, a stubborn spark. A refusal to fall behind. When the final bell rang, Instructor Bekuro finally stepped back.

"You're inexperienced," he said, "but you learn fast." He nodded once again in approval. That was the closest thing to praise Sagiri had received since he got into the Galka War Academy.

"Recruit dismisses!" He said before heading back into the inner nonagon. Sagiri followed slowly, breathing wheezing. It was still the first day and a lot had happened that he felt like he had been in Galka War Academy for months.

Chapter 25: Chapter 25: END OF DAY ONE

The training yard behind the Central Pentagon was dim, lit only by the tall lantern-spires that hummed with pale light. First year boys were already lined up in neat rows, short training daggers sheathed at their hips. Sagiri slipped quietly into the back of the formation, still an outsider, still the older boy who should have been far beyond this class but wasn't. He however was the same size as some of the first years and others were taller and more built than him. He really needed to eat more and add weight. This time the instructor was a familiar face. It is Yavaga.

"Today we are going to do dagger work sparring," he barked. "Foundations first. Stance. Balance. Targeting." He was not playing around like during the journey. His face was serious as he scanned the arena.

The boys straightened. Sagiri did too. He had just been from his basic dagger handling lesson and perhaps it was the intention of the one who arranged his curriculum to incorporate it with the first year dagger work.

"Feet apart," the instructor snapped. "Dominant leg behind. Weight on the balls of your feet. A dagger is not for display, it is for attack and defense." Sagiri mimicked the stance, adjusting his balance. The dagger was more sharp this time and even lighter than the blunt one he was using with instructor Rana

"Raise your off-hand and protect your throat," the instructor continued, stepping between the rows. "Dagger low. Point angled forward. You don't slash unless you have no other choice. Stabbing is faster, cleaner and less noisy." The words echoed inside Sagiri's Archive, imprinting themselves with unsettling brightness. It had already captured all the stances from Rana now only his body was left to catch up.

"Now draw!" A ripple of metal hissed as the boys unsheathed their blades. Sagiri copied them. He made them attack and defend in unison on their own for a while. He walked through the rows and when his eyes fell on sagiri he smiled before adjusting his stance.

"Partner up!" instructor Yavaga ordered. Since the student number is an even number, Sagiri was left with no partner. Yavaga separated two boys and pushed one to him. Yavaga then took the other to spar with him. They are around Sagiri's body size but more skinny and sharp-faced. He stepped automatically toward him and got into the sparing attacking position.

"Light sparring," Yavaga said. "Begin."

The partner lunged first, sloppy but fast. Sagiri stepped aside instinctively, tracing the boy's movement with quiet eyes. His dagger came up too slow, his timing off by a full half second. The partner tapped him in the ribs. It seemed like he could see the movements and understand what was coming but his body was still too unfit. He was already from training with instructor rana and from the warm up, he did not have any gas left in his lungs.

"One point!" The boy said just like a dozen other boys who had already touched their opponents vital point. Sagiri said nothing, only corrected his stance.

Again.

The boy moved again, going for his throat, sagiri stepped back but his defense was too slow and the boy tapped his throat. The boy was still slow compared to the fourth years yet sagiri could not keep up.

"One point!" the boy said again before the two got into position again and again but the result was the same. It was as if sagiri could see the attacks and sense them but his body was just too slow. On top of that he was extremely exhausted. After the fiftieth point top the boy. Sagiri and the boy got into position again. He just wanted to get one point in so he braced himself this time with everything he got. He knew he was still physically unfit than any student at Galga yet he wanted to get just one point in. He forced his exhaustion down and concentrated. This time, Sagiri anticipated the angle of attack. His body moved before he fully understood it as if he was one with the Archive. His reflexes became faster. He pivoted, letting the boy's momentum carry forward, and touched the dagger tip against his partner's sternum.

His partner froze.

Yavaga raised a brow. "Good. But stop hesitating. Again."

They moved. And again. And again. Sagiri's strikes became tighter, cleaner, quieter. He wasn't the fastest in the class, and he knew it, but his precision grew with every repetition. Sweat soaked his back. His arms burned. His shoulders trembled. He didn't

get another hit in but he did not let himself get discouraged, the duration between each point tap grew wider even so. Sparring with a partner was actually more interesting than just stabbing the straw man dummies. By the time sparring came to an end he was beat but he had made progress.

"FORM LINES! Dagger stances dance now!" Yavaga announced. The first years groaned in unison. Sagiri had no idea what was happening. The instructor demonstrated a flowing sequence of steps consecutively, cross step, advance, dip, rising strike to the under ribs, twist, retreat, pivot lunge. The boys moved as one, clumsy but perfectly in unison. Sagiri tried to copy them. It was chaos in his body, his timing off was off and his foot placement was messy. He stumbled once, caught himself, and tried to imitate them again. He was truly hopeless.

"Again!" the instructor shouted.

They repeated the form until Sagiri's legs felt like sand and his breath rasped in his throat. The sessions continued with repetitions, corrections, more stabs, more sweat, the burn of muscle and the gradual, growing steadiness in his hands. By the time the bells rang for dinner at 21:00 exactly, the boys were panting and drained.

"Clean your knives!" Yavaga shouted. "Recruits dismissed!" The boys sheathed their daggers and returned them to the dagger wall before they scattered toward the dining hall, laughing, complaining. Sagiri lingered for a breath, he fell to the ground and panted for a moment to catch his breath. Every muscle in his body was sore. He did not want to miss dinner however so he got to his feet slowly, he had quite a distance to walk to the fourth year pentagon. He sheathed his dagger and walked off still sweating.

By the time Sagiri reached the dining wing, his muscles buzzed with a dull, heavy ache, his shoulders twitching from overuse, his calves trembling each time he stepped. Training had wrung him dry. Yet he still had more training after dinner and one less hour of sleep for three consecutive days. He inhaled his three servings of food till he was full before he even lifted his head to acknowledge he was still among the last to finish. After dinner students were only required to study on their own or polish areas of their weakness be it combat or theoretical study. Sagiri was already too tired to do anything that required sweating so he headed for the third year library after clearance to recover the lesson he slept through.

Sagiri sat alone in the Third Year Library, staring at the list of topics he had missed that morning, introduction to theory of Advanced Mobility, Pressure Point Strikes, Pattern Recall, Strategic Layering, Ethical Command and Situational Hierarchy. He picked a stack of scrolls and books on the introduction of each one of the third-year manuals and placed them on the table and pulled the first book toward him. This was the class he had completely missed earlier, a three-hour compressed module that every other boy in the year had already mastered. He had no choice but to go through each topic one by one. They were all just introductions to the subjects and he was not hungry.

He flipped open the first manual on Advanced Mobility. The pages showed fighters mid movement, their feet angled and bodies positioned like they were dancing with weapons. Sagiri read the instructions carefully on Directional shifts, Weight transfers and Momentum cuts. He imagined himself doing each movement, light, silent, and controlled, but his legs remained stiff under the table from all the torture they had endured throughout the day. The diagrams made it look easier to understand than the notes. He studied each sketch twice, committing the postures to memory.

Pressure Point Strikes introduction manual was next manual, it was thinner but its diagrams more profound. It showed the eleven human points that could shut down a body instantly, one under the jaw, the throat base, the ribs, the shoulder, the neck, the solar plexus, and others. Each diagram had a red dot marking the target and an arrow showing the angle of the strike. Sagiri's eyes narrowed as he traced each point with his thumb. He circled the lethal ones so he would avoid using them carelessly. His head throbbed once, sharply, but he pushed the pain aside.

Then he moved to the third book, Pattern Recall introduction. This one focused on identifying enemy habits, movements fighters repeated under pressure. The only book listed simple beginner patterns, Repeat Lefts, Three Step Advance movements, Body Open Before Strike, Delayed attacks and many others. Each had a looping diagram showing how a fighter unconsciously telegraphed their next action. Sagiri leaned over the page, forcing himself to memorize the patterns. His vision blurred once, but he blinked until the lines steadied. His eyes were feeling drowsy yet he still had one more hour to go.

Strategic Layering was the fourth topic. It was dense with flowcharts. It explained how every decision in combat stacked on the one before it. First: understand the terrain. Second, secure your position. Third, read your opponent's state and lastly choose the strike. If the first layer failed, the rest collapsed. Sagiri copied the main flowchart into his notebook, even though his hand shook from fatigue. He needed the structure in front of him to keep the information straight in his head.

The fifth topic on ethical command introduction was short. It explained when a student could legitimately take command of a squad. Firstly, only when an officer was injured, secondly, when hesitation risked lives, or thirdly, when your skill was the only one suited to the situation. It did not need diagrams or techniques, just responsibility. Sagiri read it twice, the words sinking quietly into him.

Introduction to Situational Hierarchy was the last manual. It broke combat decisions into four levels, Objective, Survival, Execution and Aftermath. Sagiri tried to underline everything important, but his vision kept swimming. He rubbed his eyes, forcing himself to stay focused, forcing himself to finish the little potion left. He sat back in the chair, breathing slowly through the heaviness dragging at his body. He had covered everything he missed in the morning but the cost was written all over his trembling hands and fogged vision. The archive had used all his strength just to absorb only the introduction of the four books. The good news was however it was a few minutes to one

and he dragged his body through the pentagons to the fourth year dormitory wing. Torena was waiting at the door and nodded in approval at seeing him before leaving. He was truly strict. All in all, one of nine months had finally come to an end.

Chapter 26: Chapter 26: THE POOL AND THE WILL

Sagiri had barely closed his eyes when the gong went off again. Unlike the previous day he was more prepared today. It took him ten seconds to put on his clothes and he was still almost the last one to get in the traditional meditative position. Torena nodded in approval before signing and got into a meditative position himself. Sagiri had always loved to fall into meditative slumber and he used the meditation time to extend his sleeping time. The thirty minutes of meditation went by almost too quickly and all the boys were dismissed to go to their morning training. The other would be obstacle training and he had to run to the first year pentagon to train under captain Fuwuka.

The run across the long distance had him sweating and his back was soaked when he finally got to the first year weapon handling training arena. Fuwuka was already standing in the middle looking as irritated as ever.

"You are late again." he said in disappointment. He tossed the same spear from yesterday at him. "Lift it to your shoulder with your left hand and circle the arena until I tell you to stop. Sagiri knew just like yesterday the man was not going to let him change his hands but still he was not ready for it. His body was sore from the day before and every step was even more agonizing than the day before. Even so he pushed himself as fast as he could which was too slow for Fuwuka who frowned deeper and deeper.

"That is the poorest form I have ever witnessed." Fuwuka said. "Increase your pace!" Fuwuka clapped his hands but the truth was Sagiri was already at his limit. He could taste blood on his lips and his heart was beating out of his chest. He had not recovered from the day before and it was too much to take. Just as he had expected, however, Fuwuka didn't tell him to change his hand. Having trained dagger handling yesterday.

"You need to build stamina if you are going to handle any more training. This is just the foundation and I just don't see you improving at this rate." Fuwuka said when Sagiri slowed down to just a jog that was so slow it could be counted as walking. Sagiri had only done fun stuff or hunted for fun but he had never really submitted his body to such extensive training. He knew he had a long way to go but at the moment it was impossibly hard for him to go on. Yet it had only been thirty minutes and his bones and muscles could not take it anymore. He stopped when he felt like his heart was going to jump out of his chest. He wheezed for air and his lungs burned. It was physically impossible for him to go on.

"If you stop, I will deduct one more hour from your sleep." He threatened and Sagiri tried to move but his knees buckled and he fell to his knees. The arena tilted and his eyes swam. He knew one hour of sleep was going to be deducted but his body had been pushed to his limit and with too little sleep.

"Recruit sagiri rebels," he announced and two junior instructors appeared. They had been watching the training at a distance. "Take him to the punishment chamber." he said, voice thick but sagiri could not sense any malice, it was just the laws of the academy and disobedience had to be punished. He was pulled to his feet by the two junior instructors by his arms as they pulled him.

They pulled his sagging body across the corridors until they reached the central pentagon. The biggest pentagon in the Galka War Academy. They entered through an underground entry and kept going down a long stairway beneath the central pentagon. The temperature dropped fast the lower they went, dry cold first, then wet cold. Torches lit the narrow passage, flickering against the damp stone walls. So Galka War Academy had a big underground prison beneath it?

The chamber below was silent except for the echo of dripping water. The archive inside sagiri had not stirred since it went and absorbed a whole book. It seemed it had given up on him too since he woke up. After a few twists and turns they broke out into a large opening where at its centre lay a large mass of water, right beneath the core of the academy. The freezing pool sat in the middle, black and still, fed by an underground spring. No steam. No warmth. Just a depth that swallowed light.

The juniors pushed him forward. Sagiri tripped on his feet before he fell flat on his face. Salka wasn't joking when he told him that he was going to die in the academy. It was not only dark but cold. His breath fogged in front of him in the dim light and he shivered. One of the aides opened a metal gate along the edge of the pool. The gate touched the edges of the pool and it was circular just like the walls of the pool. They were smooth and slippery.

"Toss him in, naked or with clothes I don't care." Fuwuka said to the two juniors. They didn't hesitate before grabbing him and throwing him into the chilly dark, probably bottomless pool. sagiri did not offer any resistance mostly because he did not have any strength to continue. The water hit him like a punch to the chest. His breath vanished. His body locked for an instant as he sank to the bottom for a while. The pool was indeed bottomless because even after sinking for a while and still he hadn't touched the bottom. The pool was not enjoyable like the ones back at home. It was an abyss of punishment. His lungs burnt with lack of oxygen before instinct forced him upward. He broke the surface with a choking gasp.

There was no ledge to cling to even so. The walls of the pool were smooth stone. Nothing to hold and nothing to rest on. He kicked just to keep his mouth above water. The cold numbed fast his tired arms and legs then his chest before a deep ache set in his bones as if the water was squeezing him from the inside. His limbs felt heavier every second. The pool was not just like any other pool, it was like its waters held gravity itself and they pulled everything they touched and swallowed it to the very bottom. The juniors stood at the edge, watching quietly. No one counted time for him. No instructions. No rescue. Fuwuka stood even far back unconcerned.

"On a battlefield," Fuwuka's voice cut through the cold, "your enemy does not care why you collapsed, being tired is a privilege a warrior doesn't have."

"The endless pool as I presume you have found out has no bottom, well no none has ever gone deep enough to find out, if you stop swimming you will sink and die" he said as he watched sagiri swim with all he had to keep afloat. Fuwuka was the harshest instructor and principal senraki putting him in charge of training a newbie was just cruel.

Sagiri slipped under once, then twice each time fighting back up with slower movements. His arms had already been exhausted from training and he did not have much stamina left. The cold worked its way into his head. Sounds dulled. Breathing felt separate from his body. His muscles started misfiring, jerking instead of kicking. He was at the end of his rope. He knew he had only been in the pool for a few minutes but its pull made it seem like he had been kicking, flailing and trying to keep afloat for hours. His fingers wouldn't close properly to tear the water surface. His knees stopped bending fully. Every movement dragged more water into his mouth. It was a losing battle, he was going to sink eventually.

Sagiri's body finally gave out in the freezing pool. He had pushed until his legs simply stopped moving and the moment they failed, the water pulled him down without hesitation. His chin slipped under, then his mouth, then the rest of him sank into the cold darkness. He felt the numbness climb over his skin as if it wanted to swallow him whole. His lungs burned, but his limbs refused to respond. His mind slowly drifted into the same quiet stillness as the water around him. He dipped under again not willingly but because the cold pool plus his tired limbs he was simply unable to. The blackness closed around him, silent and thick. He felt himself sink, but he could not fight it.

He wasn't panicking anymore. He wasn't even thinking. His thoughts were fading one by one until all that was left was a dull realization that he had reached his limit. He was sinking deeper, the sounds of the world muted above him, the cold pressing on every part of him. He didn't know how long he had been sinking but he felt weightless and formless like he was one with the pool and he had accepted his defeat finally.

However just as he started to feel himself fade, something inside him shifted. It wasn't the Archive. It wasn't that structured, humming power he knew. This was something different, buried deeper than anything he had ever touched. It stirred like a small fire in his chest, faint at first, but growing hotter as the rest of him went numb.

The moment he gave up, that thing deep inside him, whatever it was refused to. it almost felt like his will. It felt like a wave of heat spread through him, not warmth from the water but something internal, something stubborn. It wrapped around him like a second skin. His muscles still barely worked, but the heat pushed against the cold and forced his body to listen. His arms twitched, then dragged weakly through the water. His legs jerked once, then twice as if coming alive, slow and heavy but enough to stop him from sinking any further. He didn't rise fast. He didn't rise strong. He simply rose

because something inside refused to let him go under. His will. His will to go on. His will to not give up even when his body failed him.

His mind, half-frozen, barely processed it. His body was exhausted and empty, yet that inner fire pushed it to move anyway. The burning sensation grew stronger the closer he got to the surface, pushing him through the last stretch even though he had nothing left to give.

When his head finally broke the surface, he gasped hard, choking on air and water at the same time. His breaths came rough and ragged, his arms moving on instinct alone just to keep him afloat. He wasn't swimming properly, he was simply surviving, fighting the cold, fighting the exhaustion, fighting the water pulling at him merely by his will. Fuwuka had not moved an inch or looked worried in the slightest as if he had known he would eventually come up. The juniors however had worried looks and they kept looking at Fuwuka waiting for him to give them the command. After a long stretched moment he finally parted his lips to speak.

"It seems you have found it. Don't be late to the arena tomorrow." He said before he turned around and walked a few steps and sagiri could feel the panicked feelings of the juniors.

"Pull him out!" He said before disappearing through the dimly lit stone corridors.

Chapter 27: Chapter 27: TEAM MANEUVERS

Sagiri was too cold to even walk after they pulled him out of the pool. He was a shivering mess and he needed help even to stand. The two junior instructors hooked their hands beneath his arms and dragged through the dimly lit corridors till they got him outside but not a second longer. Once outside they let him go and his body hit the hard ground with a thud. He fell down and laid unmoving on the hard surface. From where he lay he could hear commotion as students pooled to the other side of the assembly ground. He couldn't believe he had been in that pool for just around ten minutes yet it had felt like hours. He wanted to move and go to the assembly to avoid more punishment but he seemed to have used the last of his will in that pool. It seemed breakfast time was already over and he had missed it again.

"Fuwuka seems to have thrown you in hell pool after you barely got here." a voice said towering above him and he moved just his eyes to regard the towering figure. Captain Salka. He was even taller from where he lay and he was munching something but sagiri couldn't smell it from how badly his senses had been frozen yet he still felt the desire to eat it.

"Here eat this, I don't want you to faint on me again." Salka offered what he was eating. sagiri looked at the piece of pastry swallowing with hunger. He almost reached for it but something deep inside him was awoken in that pool. He would not succumb to his

body's weakness, he was going to find a way until he was fast enough to get to breakfast on time. He retracted his frozen fingers and shook his head.

"For a small guy you are quite strong." Salka applauded. "but at least let me help you to the assembly ground if you don't want to be punished in the suspension chamber." Sagiri could not even move his head before Salka lifted him by his waist like some weightless bag just like the other day letting his arms and feet hang limply. Everyone had already gathered except the instructors when Salka burst into the assembly ground. All eyes fell on them and most of them seemed to know which direction he had come from.

"He has been thrown into the hell pool already?"

"Must be captain Fuwuka"

Whispers broke out as Salka came to a stop and dropped him in the fourth year front line.

"FORM UP!" Salka barked and everyone fell into formation and into silence. Just then the door of the central pentagon opened and instructors poured out with principal Senraki in the lead. Sagiri pushed himself into position and in line with trembling feet.

"WARRIORS KNEEL!!" Salka barked again before he stepped back allowing for other.

instructors and principal senraki to took to the podium. Sagiri barely heard whatever was being announced. The instructors' voices reached him like muffled echoes. He heard nothing clearly. Commands, announcements or discipline reports. Everything was blurred together. He didn't even register the principal's speech, only a low tone moving in and out of his ears. Then, suddenly, the entire school recited the creed. Sagiri joined several seconds late, his voice barely a whisper.

"Recruits and cadets dismissed!" The principal finally announced. Everyone rose at once to return to their respectable pentagons but Sagiri stayed crouched for a moment longer, legs stiff, arms trembling. Only when the courtyard was almost empty did he manage to push himself upright. He limped toward the first-year pentagon, dragging one foot after the other, each step heavier than the last.

The library was warm, silent, and almost empty. He found a small table tucked into a corner and dropped his books on it. he sat down with the feeling that his bones might fall apart. The Archive inside him felt quiet now, completely still like it had gone dormant after the chaos earlier. just great abandoning him when he needed to feel its presence. Even so he wasn't going to let it out of control again and that meant he wont allow himself to read too much he passed out and allow it to work while he passed out. Well, until he understood how all of it worked. He opened the textbooks he had planned to study and pulled the second book toward him.

He opened one of the textbooks he had planned to study and pulled the second book toward him from the Terrain Advantage, Small Unit Maneuvers, Battlefield Simulations and Tactical Reading and Analysis textbooks heap. but since the archive inside him already absorbed the terrain advantage in one go, he was only left with the three. He opened the Small Unit Maneuvers.

His eyes skimmed the first Chapter of the book. Small unit maneuvers were the backbone of the academy's battlefield doctrine, three to six-man teams operating in tight formation, moving like one body rather than individual fighters. The book explained how strength didn't matter as much as synchronization. A perfect small squad could overpower a unit twice their size simply through coordinated motion. He read about formation flow, where each member had a role depending on spacing and terrain. One led movement, one handled flanks, one covered rear vision, and one manipulated angles of attack. Switches happened without verbal commands, just cues, posture changes, or finger taps.

There was a long section on pressure lines, explaining how three fighters could create invisible angles that boxed an enemy into a disadvantage without ever touching them. If executed correctly, the enemy would feel trapped long before any blade was drawn.

Another Chapter described breaking rhythm, this is a maneuver used to shatter an opponent's timing by attacking from two directions, retreating, then converging again the moment their stance opened. It required absolute trust between teammates; if one hesitated, the entire maneuver collapsed.

Sagiri took slow notes, repeating diagrams in the margins. His hands were still trembling, but the information sank into him naturally. His exhaustion made everything feel heavier, but he forced himself to keep reading.

The next volumes Battlefield Simulations and Tactical Reading and Analysis waited in a stack beside him, but for now, Small Unit Maneuvers demanded all his focus. It wasn't just interesting, it was vital. If he didn't learn to function inside a group, he would be dead in any real fight. And also he was avoiding overworking himself and passing out like the day before. He leaned back for a moment, breathing unevenly. The cold lingering in his bones made it hard to concentrate so he pushed the textbook closer and returned to the diagrams.

He let himself soak in the information not pushing himself too hard while he waited for the gong to move to the third year library. Some of the cold had left his system and his clothes had dried a bit but he was still hungry, tired and cold. Sagiri sat alone in the Third Year Library just like the day before, the library was packed but silent as everyone moved on the ball of their toes like it was a battle field, he had only covered the introduction of the third year compressed topics, introduction to theory of Advanced Mobility, Pressure Point Strikes, Pattern Recall, Strategic Layering, Ethical Command and Situational Hierarchy. He picked a stack of scrolls and books on the introduction of

each one of the third-year manuals and placed them on the table and pulled the advanced mobility book towards him.

Sagiri flipped through more pages of Advanced Mobility, The deeper he went, the more the manual shifted from basic footwork to specialized techniques used by trained combat units that were divided into five sections. He flipped through the first section, it was on direction shifts and combat level. The beginner version he had studied the day before was on simple stepping but the advanced version was entirely different.

The manual explained how seasoned warriors perform directional shifts without losing power in their stance. It broke down the Quarter-Step Angles about turning the body 45 degrees while maintaining forward pressure, Ghost Steps about planting the foot but not committing weight, allowing instant redirection. and Switch Lanes which involves sliding diagonally out of an opponent's attack path without widening the stance. Several sketches showed fighters rotating around an imaginary enemy, their footprints forming crescents on the ground. Sagiri memorized the angles carefully. He repeated the foot placements under the table, even though his muscles screamed.

The next section was on weight transfers and combat stability. The next pages showed two fighters locked in close combat, one overpowering the other not with muscle but with perfect distribution of weight. The manual described on three more sub topics. Zero-Delay Transitions was the first, it expounded on shifting weight from front foot to back foot so smoothly an opponent couldn't see the moment of commitment. The second subtopic was Counter-Lean Correction about absorbing force by tilting the spine just enough to reduce impact without losing balance. And the third and last was Power Stacks meaning generating maximum force by aligning hips, knees, and shoulders in a straight line during an attack.

Sagiri studied the diagrams showing red arrows along the spine and legs and the flow of force in every strike. If the alignment broke, the power collapsed. If the alignment held, a smaller fighter could break a larger one's guard. He traced the arrows with his fingertip, feeling his own posture straighten. Studying new times was actually something sagiri found enjoyable rather than being thrown in freezing pools.

The third subtopic was momentum cuts and stopping power instantly. This part of the textbook was blunt and the first line was all too telling. 'Momentum cuts decide whether you die or live.' The pages described how to stop a full-speed sprint or attack instantly without falling forward or opening the guard. Soldiers learned to cut their momentum with three maneuvers, the first was Anchor Drop, planting the heel sharply to halt forward motion then Hooked Stops which involved twisting one foot inward to lock the lower body and stop sliding and lastly was Core Brakes which is the tightening of the the abdomen at the exact moment motion ends, preventing collapse. Pictures showed trainees running, stopping, spinning, then striking like fluid motion broken into frames. Sagiri imagined himself trying it but he shook his head at the idea, With his current stamina, he'd collapse in three steps.

The fourth subtopic was on multi-angle approaches. This was where the three techniques combined into one. The manual emphasized that a fighter who moved in straight lines would die quickly. The strongest soldiers approached targets in unpredictable but controlled patterns either the Z-Patterns, which involves zigzag approaches to confuse an enemy's aim. The Half-Moon Entries which involves circling into an opponent's blind side and the Shadow Steps which involves moving as if to attack from one angle, then slipping to another before the opponent realizes. Each pattern came with diagrams showing footprints across the page like trails of ink. Sagiri leaned closer, studying the way each movement began and ended.

The fifth and final subtopic was on application of the first four in small unit attacks. The section tied everything together. A squad that could perform advanced mobility as a group was said to move like a single organism. The manual showed drawings of units moving in sync. Sharing, first Directional Shifts, where three fighters changed angles at the same time. Then second the Synchronized Weight Transfers, where one fighter stepped back as another stepped forward to maintain pressure and finally, Coordinated Momentum Cuts, where the entire squad halts instantly to confuse the enemy. These weren't just techniques, they were communication. Silent communication. The kind Sagiri still lacked entirely.

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the information settle. His bones ached, but his mind clung to every detail. These techniques would decide how well he performed in practical combat in three months. He couldn't afford failure. He closed his eyes and fell into meditative slumber to let the archive rewrite the new information.

Chapter 28: Chapter 28: THE QUEEN I

After lunch, Sagiri made his way to the fourth-year training grounds, still sore, still tired, but determined not to fall behind. He was feeling a little energetic after eating all the three servings. The team combat training was going to take place in the broken pillars arena or the shadow colonnade arena. It was known by two names both fitting to its structure. The Shadow Colonnade stretched across a wide stone basin carved into the academy's lower grounds, a battlefield sculpted from towering pillars and fractured platforms. Hundreds of stone columns lined its uneven surface, some smooth, some broken at jagged angles, rose in uneven rows creating a maze of shadows and pillars. Light filtered down from slit-like openings in the ceiling, casting long, shifting beams that turned the arena into a place of half-seen movement and sudden ambushes. The floor wasn't flat; it dipped and rose in subtle ridges, forcing fighters to adjust their footing while navigating narrow gaps, abrupt drop-offs, and hidden corners. From above, it looked like an ancient battlefield, but inside it looked like a battlefield designed by someone who hated comfort, high walls, uneven floors, broken pillars, narrow bridges, and shifting platforms suspended by thick chains. Everything looked dangerous, but still good for putting distance between the enemy

Miss Lakiya was already waiting at the center of the arena where it was flat and a clear gathering spot. Her dark blue coat flapped behind her her tall and thin frame making the picture look like a piece of art, like a queen rising from the ruins behind her

"Form ten lines," she ordered. The fourth-years moved instantly. Sagiri joined at the back, earning a few glances but no comments. They must have wondered why he was being allowed to join. Miss Lakiya paced in front of them with her arms behind her back as she watched the now perfect ten lines.

"Team combat," she began, "is about coordination, not individual talent. If you are a brilliant fighter alone but useless in formation, you will die first on an actual battlefield. I was not happy with how you boys played yesterday. Your team work is still lacking." she said those words especially looking in kaka's direction.

She stopped walking at one end before she announced.

"Today, we will practice that." She lifted a small whistle hanging from her neck.

"Just as you are standing in ten lines, Form teams of ten. Each row is a team," she said, and the rows started moving forward and aside, falling into teams which formed twenty-five teams in total. "One of you will act as the Queen. The remaining nine will form a rotating defense formation around them," she finished. The class already knew the drill. They split into groups quickly, and only Sagiri hesitated at the end, unsure where to go. Maybe it was because Kaka happened to be standing at the back with Kiuga and N'varu Neni, who were the cream of the best. He could already smell Kaka's distaste and Kiuga's excitement at Kaka's expense. He remained standing, not daring to move. It was truly an unlucky day for him. It started with the hell pool, and then, he landed in Kaka's team.

"New one. Here," instructor Lakiya pointed him to the team where Kiuga pulled him, putting his hand around his shoulder.

"Kaka, your rival is finally on our team," He teased, and Kaka's breath hitched. Sagiri knew that this was the most unfortunate pairing. The strongest guy in the team with the weakest in physical form.

"If you drag the team down, I will kill you myself." Kaka sneered, going to stand as far away as possible. Miss Lakiya continued:

"The objective is simple. Protect your queen. Eliminate the queens of other teams. I will give a white sash to each queen. Your queen's sash is taken, you are out, and the team with the biggest number of sashes wins." She pointed to the arena. "You will fight within the obstacle field. Every corner, height, shadow, and surface can be used. Use the terrain. Use formations. Use movement patterns."

She blew the whistle once.

"These are the rules: If your queen is even touched you lose a member if he loses the sash, your entire team is out. If you leave your queen unguarded, you are out. No strikes above the neck. No full-force attacks. The only goal is to get past the knight and steal the sash from the queen. Cooperation over aggressiveness," he said, looking at Kaka again. "I don't care, which means you use as long as you don't breach the rules. She folded her arms and posed as if to let the information sink in.

"And remember... the queen is not allowed to run more than five paces away from the defensive circle. If your formation collapses, so does your team." The teams shifted uncomfortably. This wasn't strength training, this was formation intelligence.

"Choose your queen," Miss Lakiya said. She could have just named the protected, A King but she just loved to do things how she saw fit.

"Kaka, would you like to be the queen?" Kiuga teased and kaka sneered at even being referred to as, a term meant for a woman. He looked like he was about to kill kiuga but instead he just ignored him and kept his eyes on the other teams with hostility as if he couldn't wait to smash them. His eyes held a promise of pain.

Sagiri's team immediately looked at him. He was still far behind in combat and physical prowess, so he could only settle for being protected. He nodded before going over to pick up his sash. Once every queen received their sash, Miss Lakiya blew the whistle sharply.

"BEGIN!"

The Game began, and immediately the arena exploded into movement as the teams moved deep into the arena to find strategic positions before they attacked. Teams scattered between the tall pillars and jagged platforms. Sagiri's team tightened formation immediately, three in the front, two on each side of him, two at the rear, and three even further out in a triangle formation around the team to scout the surroundings as they moved

"Keep the queen in the center! Rotate with the terrain!" Miss Lakiya shouted from above. She had already climbed to the highest pillar using her hooked rope that always stayed at her waist. She was now crouched, taking in the whole arena. Sagiri's team moved like a turning wheel, adjusting their formation as they navigated through broken staircases and slanted ground. He stayed in the middle.

A shout echoed from the far side of another team charging.

"Left side incoming!" Ulekai, a boy in the team on the outer triangle point yelled.

Kiuga shifted instantly, getting in position to guard him. Two opponents rushed between the pillars, aiming straight for him. Kaka appeared in a blur, he was among the leading three. The other defenders interlocked shoulders, forming a curved protective line. The

enemy was first they were twins from class B and they were acting alone without a team, They did not back down at the sight of kaka but circled as if looking for openings, tried to slip through from the rear moving in unbelievable speed evading and hiding, it was uncanny how much they looked alike and how in unison they moved, but the defensive wheel rotated, cutting off every angle. The queen stayed shielded.

"Don't give chase Kaka, they are just trying to lure you out because you are the strongest, so their team can attack while you are gone." Kiuga made a deduction quickly and Sagiri was starting to realize why he was a top student. He was a funny character but his observations were on point. He would be a lethal opponent in a battle. Kaka, who was almost charging, stopped and returned to his position.

"Childish." he cursed.

They advanced deeper into the arena, ducking under hanging beams and crossing narrow platforms. The sound of combat filled the arena as teams fought in different corners, some collapsing already, their queens tapped out, their members forced to step aside.

"Two teams eliminated," Miss Lakiya shouted from her tower. "Apply Pressure drills! Surround, break, reform!"

Sagiri's team tightened instantly. They moved for a bit before they found a high position where shadows were plenty.

"You. stay behind that pillar and don't move." Kaka said to him and sagiri stood behind a pillar, the sash tied around her head as it was instructed. Kaka then stayed in a watchful position waiting for a team to attack. Kiuga was giving instructions about how to stay positioned and when to attack. Having kaka on their team was both an advantage and a disadvantage because it made them a threat that needed to be eliminated. The two opposing teams fought each other for a second at a distance then noticed Sagiri's group in the distance. With Kaka as an opponent one team wasn't enough and so they formed temporary alliances and rushed together.

"Here they come!" kiuga yelled. He had divided the team into three triangles. "The outer triangle you have to run in and attack but you wait till I give command, the second triangle you stay hidden when they are close move in but make it as if you are going for their queen.

"Wont that leave our queen open." Ulekai asked, he was now in the inner triangle.

"The first three will help break the momentum and they are all strong fighters, you on the other hand are good in aerial battle as you can move first using the train to propel you. That will scare them and force half of them to move back and protect their queen. Your role is to apply pressure. Then me, Kaka and N'varu Neni will hold back the other half." he said confidently and Ulekai nodded and waited for the command.

Two full squads charging at once. Sagiri tensed and the power inside him finally stirred as if it was an extension of his feelings. When they were close enough, Kiuga finally gave the command.

"First team go! The second team, wait." The first three were strong but against twenty it was impossible and they were getting over powered. "Go now." kiuga said and sagiri finally understood why. The three boys were fluid in movement and they needed just a tap of their hand to a pillar or a raised surface to propel themselves so far forward like their bodies were made of wind as they advanced as if they were going for the two queens. It worked just kiuga predicted and half the teams fell back to protect their queens. An opponent after all cannot be underestimated. The other half advanced while the other six kept the first half busy and at bay. The eight boys approached quickly, eyes set on sagiri and the three boys fell into defensive positions. They needed to keep the eight at bay while still protecting sagiri.

The clash happened fast.

Chapter 29: Chapter 29: THE QUEEN II

Hands grabbed. Bodies slammed.

"Maintain your formations!" Miss Lakiya barked watching how some teams broke apart under pressure. "Team five and seventeen eliminated"

Kiuga sank into frog position and disappeared from Sagiri's eyes for a minute, he was not only first but he was managing to keep three opponents grounded. He was not rendering heavy blows but he was just going for their vital points taking away their mobility. He moved again, taping one to the vital point at the back above the kidney. He was not going for the kill but the opponent staggered and fell to his knees, the other two circled him deeming him too dangerous to turn their back to him. They charged at the same but kiuga dodged them and jumped so high before twisting mid air, while he was upside down he tapped another's back vital point.

"The back stabber!" He yelled before he landed to his feet gracefully sliding a few feet back before he sank in his frog defensive position again. indeed kiuga Inzadi of the Lofekeni tribe was a character. The Lofekeni tribe were known for their secret art which was good at hitting the back. You don't turn your back to the Lofekeni, your back turns to them. fighting an opponent who mostly went for your back in a battle was quite unnerving by itself. N'varu Neni was holding back, he was not just fast on his feet, his feet did not make any sound at all. He was not as good as kiuga but he was still good. kaka was surprisingly still, he had moved even closer to sagiri, the first to go after him were the most unlucky lot because Kaka was a whole small battalion by himself and of course he was not one to listen to to instruction not to use too much force.

Kaka captured one by the neck and tossed him a few feet in the air before his back connected with a pillar.

"Kaka, I said no injuries." Miss Lakiya yelled from her position but Kaka was not listening. He swept the other off of their feet and when they jumped up to avoid the deliberate attack he suspended his body weight on one arm and kicked him with both his feet which sent him flying just a few feet. Sagiri had seen the move being used by captain Salka. Kaka however wasn't half as powerful as Salka's yet it did his job. He had used lesser force for the attack after being chastised by instructor Lakiya, yet the opponent staggered back and fell to his knee clutching his ribs. One opponent managed to slip past N'varu Neni and headed straight for sagiri exploiting the small opening while kaka was busy, it was a small second but it seemed the other two were just his decoys.

Sagiri's senses did not miss him and he sidestepped quickly yet the opponent changed his maneuver quickly and used his other hand to tap him on the shoulder so slightly. Kaka turned quickly but it was too late, their queen had been tapped and that meant one member had to go. The assaulter did not wait to be attacked by kak before he fled. The damage was already done.

"Team 25 queen tapped once! one member eliminated!" Miss Lakiya announced and Kaka cursed, punching a hole in a pillar. Perhaps it was their strategy or just luck but it had changed the dynamic causing every member of team 25 to retreat and be on the defense at Kiuga's command.

"I am eliminated." N'varu Neni announced. If a team could not decide who to eliminate then miss Lakiya could eliminate anyone but if that someone was kaka then they were doomed. It was quite honorable for N'varu Neni to eliminate himself and it saved the team time as they fell to the defense circling around Sagiri. He was pulling the team down but there was nothing he could do but watch. He had been too slow to even dodge a tap. How pathetic he thought and turned to watch his teammates fight. They were strong but against two teams with one less member the following few minutes were rough but they held on.

"All teams, stop. "Miss Lakiya blew the final whistle. "Time is up!"

Everyone froze at once but remained in defensive positions till their opponents retreated. Sagiri's team exhaled in relief. Kiuga fell to his back dramatically.

"That was tough, I hate working this hard, it's your fault, King Galka, you should smile more, you have made an enemy of everyone," he whined.

"I don't indulge in such useless behavior," Kaka said in a matter-of-fact tone, and Kiuga groaned. Miss Lakiya scanned the arena, counting the remaining teams.

"Ten teams remain. Good enough but it's more than I thought." She nodded once. "Tomorrow, you will all repeat this exercise with reduced visibility. Prepare accordingly. The top three teams will get assigned ten points which will be shared among each member and this point which will already apply in your final exam" team combat is

marked out of ten and only the lucky one got to score more than half in the final exam. A seven could even be considered excellent.

"Cadet dismissed!" She announced. Sagiri and the others stepped back, breaking formation before turning to leave.

"You almost made us lose," Kaka snarled regarding him with disgust. "We could have done better just by tying the sash to a pillar and protecting it." He said moving impossibly close, and Sagiri could feel aggressive energy pouring off of him in waves. He was right, however, and Sagiri just nodded before he turned to leave. He had the basics of weapon handling training, and since he had spent the whole lesson being protected, he was quite rested.

Instructor Bekuro was already waiting by the time Sagiri got to the small dagger training arena on the outer nonagon. He wondered if he could ever make it in time. The lesson went beyond stances this time. Instructor Bekuro taught him to understand that a dagger was not held the same way at all times.

"Try to stab me," he instructed as soon as they got into position. Sagiri hesitated, lifting his dagger slowly. Instructor Bekuro moved fast, slapped the dagger out of his hand, and in one move spun it in his arms before pointing at his throat.

"I have already told you to stop hesitating! Now attack!" Instructor Bekuro chastised, tossing him the dagger again. Sagiri braced himself before he charged. He didn't even get close before Instructor Bekuro moved and slapped the dagger from his hands before pointing at his throat again. He was so fast.

"Sometimes direct attacks don't work," he said after he slapped the dagger out of Sagiri's hand a dozen times. "You need to make a weapon a part of you and change it to your own will when in battle."

He then taught Sagiri to switch grips mid-motion, from forward to reverse. He performed several alternative moves. Blade sliding across his palm, hilt caught between fingers, without ever breaking movement. Sagiri failed each time he tried. His eyes had understood the motions, but his body had not yet caught up. They moved to the straw bodies, but the result was the same. Footwork followed. Advance, cut, pivot. Slip past, stab, turn, again and again. By the end, Sagiri was breathing hard, sweat dripping from his chin onto the stone floor, yet he had not managed to make the dagger obey his will.

"You will practice tomorrow by yourself, I'll check on your progress, and if you haven't grasped the basics, you are going in the cooling chamber." Instructor Bekuro said. "Recruit dismissed!" He added before leaving. This place sure has many torture chambers, and he had a feeling he was going to visit every one before the exam in three months. He dragged his now sore body to the first year weaponry class taught by Yavaga, and this time he was even more sloppy than the day before. The boy he was

paired with made a living man straw dummy out of him with the number of taps he got in. It was as if the body got more sore as days went by. Every part of his body was hurt.

"Is it me, or did you get even slower?" Yavaga mocked after every first year had cleared out, and Sagiri was still stooped forward, trying to catch his breath. "It will get worse before it gets better," he tapped his shoulder, and Sagiri winced. Even being tapped was too painful. Sagiri sat alone at dinner, but midway through the meal, the hall went silent, and heavy footsteps echoed. The discipline commander and instructor, Torena, walked in looking as stoic as always. His eyes zeroed in on the room, and everyone held their breath, hoping he was not the subject of his arrival. His eyes finally stopped on Sagiri. What am I being punished for this time? He wondered.

"Recruit Sagiri!" he called, and Sagiri scrambled to his feet and got into the discipline stance. "Your clothing is quite an eyesore. Get to the central building now and pick your uniforms. If I see you in those rags a minute longer, I will take all your hours of sleep for a week. The Galka Academy uniform is part of the discipline code."

"Yes, commander!" Sagiri replied, partly relieved that he was not being punished. Torena turned around and left. He rushed through his meal before rushing to the central pentagon. The uniform department was silent, and only the sound of sewing machines could be heard from the inner chambers.

"You must be recruit Sagiri," a short, plump lady said in greeting. Sagiri nodded. "Follow me," she said, leading the way.

They walked into another room then into an inner room which smelled of fabric. "Wait here," he instructed before going into an inner compartment before coming out with a pile of fabric.

"Every student gets two uniforms which are renewed every three months. Yours were especially made to fit your condition. She said, handing sagiri the bundle. "That is the changing room, change and hand me those old ones, they will be put away in your compartment with any thing you came with that is not allowed in the academy. The only thing sagiri had not been allowed to take with him was his retracting weapon that he still did not know what it held or how to use.

The uniform is made from thick, tightly woven dark grey fabric. The surface is slightly rough and dry, built to resist tearing and scraping. It does not stretch easily, but it bends where it needs to. Inside, the fabric is smoother and softer, meant to sit against the skin without rubbing. At the elbows, knees, and shoulders, the material is reinforced and heavier. These areas feel stiffer and more protective. The sleeves and legs are loose and baggy, allowing free movement and hiding the exact position of the arms and feet. The fabric folds naturally and does not cling. The pockets are firm and structured, their edges stiff enough to guide the hand without looking. Even when wet or dirty, the uniform keeps its shape and does not sag. It is practical, durable, and made for training and combat, not appearance.

Sagiri flexed in the uniform pulling the attached mask up to just below his eyes and the hood above his head covering half his face. The gloves were the same fabric as the mask but hardened at the knuckles. It was surprisingly comfortable, warm, light and easy to move in. He already felt a ton lighter. The boots added an inch to his height and made his feet feel slightly better. He tied the ash gray sash around his waist before stepping out with his old clothes.

"You finally don't look like an eyesore." Torena was standing in the middle of the room. "Now you need to work harder to be worthy of that uniform." He added before walking away.

Chapter 30: Chapter 30: NOSTALGIA

After supper, Sagiri went to the first-year Pentagon to study one of the compulsory twelve subjects taught in all high schools. One among the twelve: World Calculations, Art of War, The Art of Hunting, Building Study, Plant study, Innovation and Technology study, Tribe History study, Tagayia Language Study, Human Anatomy, Fitness Study, Medicine and Weaponry. Galka, being a war high school, concentrated more on the study of the Art of War, Fitness study, Weaponry, and language study. Just like, the schools in the east concentrated more on medicine, plant study, and human anatomy, and for the central high schools, building study, innovation, and technology study, the west, of course, world calculations, art of war, and weaponry. All in all, every student was required to pass at least half of the units to qualify to join the prestigious colleges of Tagayia.

Galka academy gave priority to overall subjects in first year and second year where they start to bend more towards the Art of war. Even so students are required to work on their own so as to pass all subjects. Sagiri picked the Tribe history study book to read. It was about the history of how Tagayia came to be. The history of tribes and the introduction to the twelve subjects. He already knew enough about medicine and enough about the art of innovation. The others, he could just catch up little by little. The only problem was that he kept missing breakfast which made the archive slow.

He did not want to push himself, so with two hours to spare, he went back to the fourth-year Pentagon. He needed to practice with the dagger. Instructor Bekuro had said he would punish him if he had not made progress, and so he needed to catch up. Most students were in the private tribal secret arts arenas at the moment, practicing their secret tribal arts, and so many combat arenas were free. He went into one with figure dummies, and it was completely empty except for Kaka. He moved through the space in silence, bare feet gripping the cold stone as he advanced on the training dummies. His first punch landed with a dull crack, driving deep into the reinforced chest. He followed with another, then a third, each strike controlled and heavy enough to make the frame shudder.

Kaka shifted his stance and kicked. The blow snapped into the ribs, then cut low to the knee joint, hitting the marked vital points without pause. He stepped away instantly,

twisting his body aside as if narrowly avoiding a counterstrike that wasn't there. He kept moving, weaving between imaginary enemies, ducking, turning his shoulders, sliding just out of reach. His fists worked in tight, short and efficient strikes while his eyes tracked threats only he could see. He never stopped long enough to be surrounded.

He stepped back and drew a half a dozed dagger when his imaginary enemies surrounded him. three blades left his hand smoothly and struck the target board across the arena, sinking into the mark where a heart would be. Kaka rolled to the side before it hit, rising low and balanced. Another dagger flew to the throat. A fifth on the inner thigh. Each throw was paired with a step, a dodge, a shift in angle. He reaped in the air and released the sixth which his the spot between the eyes on the board before he landed soundlessly.

When he returned to the dummies, he moved through them like a man fighting in the middle of a crowd, striking, slipping, adjusting. The arena echoed with impact and breath as Kaka trained against enemies that lived only in his mind. The display of power was amazing and scary at the same time. Sagiri could not turn back, even so. Kaka was already disgusted with his weakness, and running away now to avoid him could only make him despise him more. He picked a spot at the far end and as far as possible from Kaka. He unsheathed his dagger before a training dummy, and he got into a stance just as Instructor Bekuro had taught him.

He sank into a stance, his dagger tucked behind his fist, before he charged, stabbing the dummy. He practiced the basic stances for a while. Even so, the thundering and grunts from kaka alone echoed and made the arena tremble. He was already good, and he was going that hard. Sagiri changed to the stances for indirect attacking. He tried to make the dagger obey his will, but it slipped and hit the floor with a thud. He tried again with imaginary enemies in his head, but moving the dagger with his will was. He spun it, and it went flying, almost dismantling his legs. He was lucky the boots were reinforced with a hard material.

He tried again and again, but the result was the same. He visualized Instructor Bekuro's movements in his head and tried to repeat them, but it was futile. Kaka was still going at it, and he only left when it was bedtime. Staying outside if you were not under punishment past time also called for punishment, but Sagiri could tell the boy could have kept going. Sagiri stood alone with the dagger in his hand, trying to repeat what Instructor Bekuro had shown him.

He tried again. Advance. Cut. Pivot. He forced himself to go faster and almost lost the blade when his grip slipped. His shoulders tightened, his feet planted when they were supposed to move. He felt heavy, loud, predictable. Nothing flowed the way it had under Instructor Bekuro's eyes.

Sagiri struck the straw dummy and lingered half a second too long. In a real fight, that pause would have gotten him killed. He pulled back, breathing hard, frustration burning

in his chest. He knew the movements. He could see them clearly in his head. But his body refused to listen.

Sagiri lowered the dagger, hands shaking, aware of the distance between what he had been taught and what he could actually do.

Now alone, he could hear his own movement and sound, and he was clearly unstable. His breathing was unstable, and the dagger was not matching his rhythm. He riffled through the archive to see what he had missed, but he had captured every step and memorized it. It was just that his body was far from reenacting what he saw. He stopped suddenly to catch his breath. His body was sore, but the Galka Academy did not provide space for him to catch his breath.

Suddenly, the markings on his body slithered under his skin. They had been disturbed, and he fell to one knee, his face moving frantically. Up till then, he had thought he was with Kaka, and after he had thought he was alone. Yet his senses had suddenly captured a presence he had not perceived, and the power inside him had stirred in recognition. He staggered back, his eyes raking the room. He touched his hand to the ground but the presence was gone like it was never there and he was alone.

The archive stirred and the markings crawled as if they wanted to tell him something that he could not yet understand like always. The power inside him stirred for the first time with a feeling other than violence. Whenever it had stirred in the past most of it had to do with his dreams or he was in danger yet now it swelled with something different. Nostalgia. Recognition. Longing. The feeling was so intense he clutched his chest. He felt the longing as if it was his own.

Someone had been watching him. He did not know for how long but the power inside of him had not screamed 'enemy' or wanted to kill him. It had exuded a feeling of familiarity like it did in his dreams. The feeling was so strong it almost brought tears to his eyes, he could have cried if he was capable of it. A painful longing. Whoever it was must have been so highly skilled to hide his presence from him so well. It was not the same as Kiana who didn't have presence or the strange girl who also lacked a presence. This one had a presence he couldn't perceive or a presence he could hide.

Sagiri moved around the whole arena looking for evidence but just like the wind the person had disappeared. The hour if his punishment had come to an end even so and he still hadn't made progress so he headed for the fourth year dormitory. Torena was there as and Sagiri saluted him distractedly before he headed to his room. He was tired yet after he cleaned up he couldn't sleep and when he slept his the sleep was dreamless as usual but his heart ached till it was time to wake up again.

The morning when he woke up his body was sore than the previous day. Guess that is what happens when your body is pushed into strenuous physical exercises when you had never pushed it that far.

"CALMING THE MIND!" Torena commanded getting into a meditative position as usual in the middle of the circular dormitory structure. The feeling of nostalgia had not receded but even as he headed to the first year Pentagon to be tortured by captain Fuwuka. This time he instructed him to put his hands straight in front of him and hold the spear in his arms in front of him. This was way harder than the last two days and Sagiri was already out of gas by the first lap. He pushed himself even as his chest burned. He did not want to be thrown in the endless pool again. It was not a pleasant experience, and with his already tired hands, he did not know if he could make it or if Fuwuka could just let him die. Somehow, the foreign, familiar feeling in his chest urged him to keep going. He wanted to soak in it again, and he did not know why. Some part of him, however, wanted to run from him.

He felt his legs shaking violently as he slowed down to a jog, then a walk, then he was dragging his feet. His hands shook, not able to carry the spear's weight while suspended for long. Suddenly, a strange feeling hit him in his gut, and he fell forward spitting a mouthful of blood. His body could not physically handle the torture he had endured. He tried to get up and continue, but he could not even stand. Not even his will could have saved him.

"Cadet, five-minute rest!" Captain Fuwuka announced, maybe realizing that Sagiri was going to die if he continued. That was all he needed to hear before he fell forward after spitting another mouthful of blood.