

THE LAST KEEPER #Chapter 31: THE PILL - Read

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"Cadet dismissed!" Fuwuka said when Sagiri remained still on the ground. He had tried to stand up twice, but he fell back down, coughing blood. He walked past him, but then came back and lifted him like Salka always did.

"It's been only two days and you are ready to die," he snickered as he walked through the corridors of the first pentagon before breaking into the central pentagon.

"Fuwuka, aren't you torturing the boy enough?" Sagiri barely heard Salka's footsteps following Fuwuka to the central medical wing. "The boy has been to this wing twice in three days. If I didn't know you, Fuwuka, I could have thought you were trying to kill."

"The boy has no core strength at all. He is useless," Fuwuka said, walking into the medical room. "Give him the strength rejuvenating pills, Miss Sayaku," he said to one of the high-ranking healers.

"Fuwuka, why do you torture the boy? You already dumped him in the endless pool, and now you have him bursting veins." The nurse chastised, pulling Fuwuka's ear, and he just stood there and let it happen. She was a whole two feet shorter than him. She was dressed in a calm blue coloured combat uniform, clearly made for the military medical teams. Her hair was a mob held back slightly by a pin, but it still stood up like a wildfire. Fuwuka dumped him on the healer's bed and retreated.

After Sagiri took the black pill, he felt better almost instantly. It did not matter that he had not eaten breakfast again, but he felt rejuvenated. He wished the healer could give him more, but he knew that was not possible.

"I told you to add weight, but instead you have shed some in only two days," Salka said after Fuwuka left.

"Can I have more of those pills?" Sagiri asked Salka. Salka posed for a moment before he burst into laughter.

"You are such a funny kid. Those are made for injured soldiers in battle. You are lucky to have found healer Sayaku. She only made an exception because you are too unfit." Salka laughed again and sagiri was still not good with humour so he did not understand what was funny. "I see you are better now, head to your next lesson." Captain Salka said a second after laughing his face back to normal. With the current strength sagiri felt like he could run thousands of vaara. He had missed the morning assembly and breakfast but he was energetic as he made it to the second year library.

He took the battlefield simulation volume and placed it on his desk at the corner just like always. Only today the archive was powered to the fullest and he felt like he could finish the whole unit. The first Chapter explained that battlefield simulations were not about reenacting victories, but about recreating conditions where mistakes were inevitable. The terrain was simplified. Numbers were controlled. Outcomes were recorded not to praise the winner, but to study the error that led to the loss.

Sagiri read that simulations were designed to strip soldiers of instinct. Familiar routes were removed. Timings were altered. Orders were delayed on purpose. Units were given incomplete information and forced to act anyway. The goal was to see how long a soldier could function once certainty was taken away.

Diagrams showed layered battlefields divided into phases. In the early phase, movement mattered more than force. In the middle phase, communication determined survival. In the final phase, exhaustion revealed discipline or the lack of it. The battlefield does not always reward the strongest plan. It rewards the plan that survives contact.

The simulations described in the book often ended in total collapse. Units would advance perfectly, then fracture once pressure was applied from an unexpected direction. Others would hold position too long, mistaking patience for control, until they were surrounded.

Sagiri understood then why Galka trained them through games and formations. Simulations were not about winning. They were about learning how defeat unfolded. He turned the pages slowly and soon he was at the end of the volume and he was still energetic. He moved to the tactical reading and analysis volume. It was denser than the battle simulation volume yet it made the archive inside him more eager. This book did not teach how to fight, It taught how to see.

The opening Chapters explained that every battlefield was a text written in motion. Footprints in mud. Broken grass. The angle of abandoned weapons. The absence of sound where there should have been noise. Tactical reading was the ability to extract meaning from what others overlooked. Sagiri read about threat assessment: how to judge danger not by proximity, but by intent. A still enemy was often more dangerous than a charging one. An open path was usually a trap. Safety was rarely where it appeared to be. The book broke battles down into moments. Before contact. At contact. After contact. Each moment required a different kind of reading. Before contact, the environment spoke. During contact, body language did. After contact, silence did.

One Chapter focused entirely on misdirection. The enemy will show you what they want you to see. Your task is to understand why. Diagrams showed false retreats, exposed flanks meant to draw pursuit, deliberately weak formations designed to hide reserves. Tactical reading demanded restraint. Acting too quickly meant reacting to what was shown, not what was true.

Sagiri paused, eyes burning. He realized why this subject followed battlefield simulations. One taught how battles collapsed and the other taught how to recognize collapse before it happened. By the time he reached the final pages, his head throbbed with information and the archive buzzed. If only he was this energetic daily he could finish all the books in the library, even those outside the syllabus in under three months and have time to spare to train his body. He needed to heed captain Salka's advice and eat more.

He was still energetic when he got to the third year library. He still had a few compressed second year units to study but he had already finished three months' work in three days. He wished he could finish the remaining third year volumes, but the pill effect was fading fast. He still had the Pressure Point Strikes, Pattern Recall, Strategic Layering, Ethical Command and Situational Hierarchy volumes to go after finishing advanced mobility. The third year library was full and a few curious eyes turned to look at him.

"Hey new boy, come sit with me." an overly cheery boy called him, his hair was braided in four lines and decorated with colourful ornaments. The tisewani tribe of the west. They are the most colourful tribe, and they lived in the far west. "I hear you bet the suffocation chamber, everyone was kinda scared of you but after seeing how feeble you were carried by captain salka i am not scared so i'm the first to talk to you, i'm Daziko ogiri of the tisewani tribe." he said as soon as sagiri sat down.

"Tell me why did you not go to school till now? Why are you always covered? I hear your father is related to the Grand Zorath of the east?" the boy whispered loudly but Sagiri could tell those around him were eavesdropping. He did not know his sudden display of weakness could attract such attention. Another boy moved silently and sat opposite them looking at him curiously. He might have been too hungry to notice it but whenever he walked to the third year pentagon all he could smell was courteousness yet now he could only preserve curiosity and he did not know which one was worse. He did not like being swarmed at all. The archive and the power inside him all craved solitude or absorbing the atmosphere and feelings around him could get overwhelming.

"Cadet Kutama and Daziko maintain silence and move away from that table!" an instructor snapped from and the two boys moved quickly to other tables. Sagiri breathed a sigh of relief before he opened the book that always piqued his interest.

He ravaged through the shelves before retrieving the pressure point strikes volume. The opening pages explained that pressure points were not mystical weaknesses or secret tricks. They were structural failures, places where nerves surfaced, where blood flow could be disrupted, where the body's own design worked against it. Strength was irrelevant. Accuracy was everything.

Sagiri read that pressure point strikes were divided into three purposes: disruption, disablement, and termination. Most combatants failed because they confused the three.

Disruption points were meant to break rhythm. A strike to the side of the neck could blur vision for seconds. A precise hit below the ear could destroy balance. A blow to the nerve cluster above the collarbone could deaden an arm instantly. These were not finishing moves. They were openings. Disablement points went deeper. The inner thigh where major vessels ran close to the surface. The back of the knee where stability failed under pressure. The base of the spine where shock could shut down movement. The book stressed restraint here, too much force could kill, too little would do nothing.

Termination points were listed last and without diagrams on the first read-through. These points were described sparingly, the hollow beneath the jaw, the soft space under the ribs, the junction where the skull met the spine. The text emphasized that these strikes were rarely clean in real combat where bodies moved and angles shifted. Pressure points could not be attacked head-on. The book explained that effective strikes came from movement passing angles, rotational force, and unexpected entry. A dagger did not stab straight in. It slid, hooked, twisted, and exited. Bare hands used knuckles, thumbs, the edge of the palm. The strike was small, precise, and immediate.

There was even an entire section on failure. Miss the point by a finger's width and you wasted energy. Strike too deep and you lose your weapon. Strike without creating space and you died where you stood. The book returned again and again to the same principle. Pressure point combat was not about aggression, it was about control under chaos. He mostly knew how he was still weaker than everyone and if he was in danger perhaps hitting a pressure point of a bigger opponent was his only chance for now. His hands rested on the table, fingers stiff, mind heavy with knowledge his body could not yet follow. He understood now why this subject was reserved for third year. Knowing where to strike was easy.

The pill momentary boost had run out and he chose to stop there. The pain in his body came back far worse than in the morning. It felt as if every muscle in his body had been put through a grinder. Even walking was painful. He stumbled right after he stood up but Daziko held him up.

"The first days are the worst. I almost ran away twice and regretted not going to a Sabonya wild academy, it is the closest to home and at least the art of hunting isn't too cruel." he said helping sagiri to the third year pentagon gate. "You have to tell me more about you tomorrow. I have to rush to lunch before those greedy boys finish all the servings. Just thinking that after lunch was miss lakiyas team combat class at the The Shadow Colonnade arena made sagiri want to weep. As if that was not bad enough, he was on the team with the ruthless and vicious king of galka academy who despised weakness.

It was going to be rough.

Chapter 32: Chapter 32: REPLAY

Sagiri limped across the corridors toward the Shadow Colonnade arena. He was the last to arrive, and everyone was already gathered but in their respective groups. There was a distinct smell of purpose in the air, which was absent in the previous game. Some groups had already formed temporary pacts, and a clear line of hostility was drawn between them. The creepy-looking twins were staring at Team 25, not caring to hide their hostility. Their team 4 was made of stronger opponents, too, and they were looking at Sagiri, the queen, like a target. Instructor Lakiya had not arrived, and the few minutes were spent with teams glaring at each other with hostility.

"Cadets face backwards." Her voice tore through the silence, and everyone instantly turned around to face her, maintaining their team positions. Twenty-four other instructors were standing behind her. They were wearing special gear, hiding their faces and ears. "Since there will be limited visibility even with special gear, each team will be monitored by the instructors. They will only watch, and they will not intervene." They each had a number tag, which they lifted from one to twenty-five. Miss Lakiya held one.

"You already know the objective. One queen per team. Protect yours. Eliminate the others, the environment will change," she continued. "The gas will reduce visibility and neutralize scent. You will not track by smell. You will not see beyond close range. Communication will be limited.

"Move to the instructor with your name tag!" She announced, and each team stood in line behind an instructor with their number tag. Sagiri could recognize their monitoring instructor even with their special gear covering their face and ears. It was only Lotaga who stood with a hand on his waist.

"Stimulation begins!" Miss Lakiya announced, and there was a moment of silence before paces high above in the arena opened gases pouring from them in different colors, especially black, grey, and green, which mixed to form dense fog that it was impossible to see one's hand before them. "You all have been trained to work under limited visibility, and now you are going to use other senses not affected. Still, you have to move as a team, and if a team loses half its members, they will be immediately disqualified. You have to move as a unit while fighting your opponents and protecting your queen. But unlike yesterday, you can use force and throw anything at the enemy, if you can find them that is," she continued before she put a whistle to her lips, she announced.

She paused.

"You will be given five minutes before the engagement begins. Use that time to position, memorize terrain, and establish formation discipline. Now move!" she said, and teams started moving.

"Around me," Kiuga announced, and everyone clustered around him. The gases were getting denser and denser, and they could barely see each other's figure outline. "The fog is about to get heavier. We have maintained the formation since yesterday, but just

a foot apart. After two steps, you tap pose and tap your neighbor. We can't talk because we will draw attention to ourselves, and with everyone losing two senses, using sound could be like putting a target on our backs, but we will pause after every ten steps and scan our surroundings. No one on our team is from the Tamelku tribe, whose secret art is using all six senses equally. Those two freaks are from the Tamelku clan, and they have had it out for us. So try to stay as calm as possible and use your sixth sense to the fullest.

"We go left. Find a strategic position to protect our queen, and we remain on the defensive. Move out!" Kiuga gave the command, losing all his silly humor. The team moved just like Kiuga had instructed, keeping Sagiri in the middle. Sagiri was feeling even more beat up, and he limped, making the team slow down every couple of steps. If leaving a teammate behind couldn't guarantee an elimination, and he was the queen, Kaka could have already suggested they leave him behind because every time they stopped, he could curse and give a frustrated grunt, but he remained silent not to give away their position.

Everyone might have lost their senses, but Sagiri's senses were even more active. He had removed his Oru shells to perceive everything and he could perceive each one's presence and position.

"Stop!" He said after they had been moving for a while, deep into the broken pillar and shadow arena. A team was lying in ambush waiting for them. It seems that they had one of the Tamelku clan tribe on their team. It was not the wins, but he seemed to be good, too.

"What?" Kiuga asked, but everyone halted.

"We are surrounded. Three in the front. Two on the sides and two on the left protecting their queen." He said in one breath, and a moment after speaking, the ambush moved. "Now!" he said, and just then, others perceived them and got into a defensive position.

"Ulekai and Zolinka, go for their queen!" Kiuga yelled. "Kaka front, I'll go right N'varu Neni protect the queen!" He instructed while he himself jumped into action, followed by the two he tapped on the shoulder, while Kaka attacked the incoming three on his own. The remaining two went left, covering for Ulekai and Zolinka, who were going for the queen. A moment of silence passed before bodies collided in impact. Kaka did not have to hold back anymore, and after being given a head start on the enemy's position and permission to go hard without holding back, he was in his best element. He moved even better than how Sagiri had seen him train alone the night before. He ran into the first full body ramming into him, making him fly a few feet back, hitting a broken pillar with so much force that the ground shook. The other two got into position, not expecting the team they had planned to move that first. They sank into attacking position, and Kaka opened his stance and lowered himself in an open arms stance.

Kiuga and his team had already neutralized the two. The two he tapped to aid him were just decoys to distract the two opponents on the right, for him to go around stealthily and hit their vital points on their backs, rendering them immobile for a few minutes, and that is all he needed. He instructed the two to protect the queen while he joined Ulekai and Zolinka to take the sash. The two were in a fierce battle with the two protecting the queen. The queen was good in combat, unlike Sagiri, and he dodged. Perhaps that was Kiuga's goal to act as if he was going for the sash and predict where he could move to so he could tap his shoulder.

"Team 9, one member eliminated!" their monitoring instructor said from above. They posed for a minute, frozen, trying to decide who to eliminate,

Kiuga was cunning and strategic, and Sagiri had to realize what Captain Salka said when he said Galka Academy was not short of geniuses. It had taken him just a moment to draw out the battlefield that Sagiri had drawn with his words to come up with a solid plan. Kaka, fast on his feet, reached his distracted opponent in an instant. He held him by the head using his momentum to twist both of them twice in the air before spinning him and stomping his back to his knee. The opponent groaned before he rolled on the floor in pain.

Kiuga had simultaneously used the opening to tap the queen's vital point on the neck before stealing his sash, leaving him unconscious. He then took the sash slowly before wrapping it around his neck.

"Team 25 eliminated team 9!" Lotaga announced. "Team 9, move out of the arena, carry your wounded comrades!" he added.

The team moved back surrounding Sagiri again and he could perceive the rising morale oozing off of them in waves.

"There are two teams, north west and one on the east, engaged in combat." He said again, lowly, and this time nobody questioned him. Even Kaka nodded slightly in approval but remained facing forward.

"How about the north east?" Kiuga asked, turning to face him. Sagiri was getting even weaker after staying focused for long, but his mind was still clear even as his body begged him to rest. He fell to his one knee, touching his right hand to the ground to feel for any movement, and focused his senses northeast.

"No team is there," he announced after listening for a moment. "No team is there," he announced after listening for a moment.

"We head north west. Since our queen is still bad at combat, we avoid unnecessary battles and find a place to lay low and only attack if necessary." Kiuga announced, and the team resumed their movements north west

Chapter 33: Chapter 33: REPLAY II

They moved as quietly as possible, and Sagiri was the only one who was panting. Even so, they slowed down to accommodate him, maintaining the formation. Up northwest, they moved into a position where many pillars were broken, and the terrain was irregular. The blinding mist was also the thickest there.

"Take positions." Three interchanged triangle positions with Sagiri at the centre. He was in a meditative position while the others were in their best alert position. When your senses of smell and vision are taken away, you have to heighten your sixth sense and hearing. Hearing, however, wasn't much helpful because everyone moved silently. Silence prevailed, and for a long moment the arena was silent. Apart from the occasional sounds of contact and elimination announcements, the arena was otherwise quiet, but Sagiri could perceive the tense feelings of everyone. Everyone was so tense and rigid, concentrating to the fullest, that when Sagiri changed positions, getting on one knee and touching his hands to the ground, everyone turned to him. There was finally movement. Calculated movement. Ten teams had already been eliminated, meaning the remaining fifteen were stronger teams or maybe lucky.

"What is it?" Kaka whispered. He was in the innermost triangle and closest to Sagiri. The defensive triangles were not spread out like the day before. They were just a foot apart from each other.

"There is movement in," Sagiri said, his eyes threatening to go black as the power inside him swirled.

"In all directions, there are three of them moving in spear formation from the north of us, east, and south. It is the Tamelku twins team and two other teams. It's a temporary pact."

"They want to fight as three teams together to eliminate all teams so they could take positions one to three. It was a good strategy. I am offended that I didn't think of that first," Kiuga sneered

"How far out are they?" He asked, already trusting his insight completely.

"Two hundred, one hundred, and three hundred vaara respectively," Sagiri said.

"Who is the fastest?" Kiuga whispered.

"The east one?"

"Who is the fastest?"

"The north."

"I assume the Tamelku freaks are the ones south moving not too fast or too slow so they can backstab the other two if need arises," Kiuga said, and Sagiri hummed in agreement.

"Kaka, lead the tight circular formation around the queen. You are with Zolinka, Ulekai, N'varu Neni, don't chase and don't break the circle, no matter what. Use the pillars to make up for the numbers we don't have. We can't fight all three teams in these conditions, and they have two of the Tamelku clan. We are going to force them to interfere with each other and fight among themselves. The two teams don't have a Tamelku, so we are going to calculate a in between and act like we are attacking them, then pull out and leave them to fight to come aid you. Even so, we might take long, and you might be forced to fight the tamelku freaks on your own for a while," he tapped the two from the first time it seemed they complemented his skills. They dispersed, moving northeast of their position with Kiuga in the lead. Again, Sagiri had to commend him for being a strategist.

The four surrounded Sagiri while the remaining two moved outwards to break momentum when they made contact with the Tamelku twins' team. Sagiri maintained his position tracking for every movement, even their movements. They were going for the fastest team and acting that they were from the slowest team, but making sure to calculate the distance properly, not to move in too fast and raise suspicion, or move in too late and allow the enemy to close in on their queen. They moved east at full speed before moving north to attack them in the disguise of the east. It was a hit and run to confuse, but hard enough to plant the weeds of doubt between the teams so they could attack fast. They lay low on top of the broken pillars. Sagiri was now understanding why Kiuga picked them. It was not random. Zazarie and Bukata were good at giving false illusions. When they felt the east moving and the north approaching. Zazarie moved on the ground, creating an illusion of many people moving, while Bukata moved in zigzags in the air between posts, creating an illusion of people approaching fast by air. Kiuga used this opening to move silently between the chaos to strike the approaching team when the time was right. Zazarie and Bukata kept up their act a bit longer before hitting them hard, before they retreated quickly but far enough to be undetectable but close enough to hear the two teams fall into dispute before they pulled back entirely to aid their team.

"Spinning wheel," Kaka announced lowly when the other team surrounded them, leaving only one to protect their queen. They were overconfident, and as the situation was, even with Kaka, they were overpowered since Sagiri could not fight, and the other team only had good fighters.

"They are surrounding us from every side, two on each side!" Sagiri said, perceiving their formation. He had been perceiving the whole arena nonstop, and he was at the end of his rope.

"Team six eliminated!" a voice announced. Only nine teams were still standing. Team 25, 13, 1, 2, 21, 11, 16, 8, and 17.

"Pull back Kaka announced! Two moving wheels," he announced, and the two pulled back, forming the outer circle with Ulekai leaving Zolinka N'varu Neni and Kaka in the inner circle. There was a moment of silence before the eight moved in, attacking with so much force they pushed the first circle in.

"Hold tight!" Zolinka yelled, but it was futile. Some broke through them and came for the other three,

"Kaka two coming for you, one on air and the other on the ground!" Sagiri said, and Kaka locked in immediately using his heightened senses and incorporating it with Sagiri's instructions. His attacks were precise, and the two could not make it past him.

"Zolinka, one coming straight at you, he is a silent mover!" Sagiri said to Zolinka, who was a little disoriented. He attacked blindly but hit the opponent, pushing him a few steps back.

"I thought you said there was no one with good sensory skills on their team?" The one who had been pushed back had not expected his stealth movements to be noticed.

"There wasn't. Perhaps it's their queen." Another answered.

"He is still bad at combat even so, sensory can only take him so far."

"Kaka, two more coming for you, the Tamelku." It was a good strategy to take out Kaka. Kaka was good, but against four, it was too much with the limited visibility. They managed to push him back. A painful feeling hit Sagiri on the chest, and he retched, spitting a mouthful of blood. N'varu had been standing still behind him all the while watching him with amazement and another feeling.

"Are you okay?!" he asked with worry laced in his voice. Sagiri was feeling boneless, and his vision blurred.

"N'varu Neni, one broke past Kaka, he is coming for me," he said, and N'varu moved protectively and skillfully, not missing any attack thrown at him. He spat another mouthful of blood. The power inside him stirred within him as if trying to act on its own in his weakened state. His eyes went completely black, and the ground under him shook slightly. His eyes were hidden by his uniform hoodie so no one could see how they had changed colour, but the earth under him had felt him.

"To your left..."

"Two coming for you..."

He kept giving instructions over and over again. It was all he needed to do to contribute something to his teammates, who were already fighting and giving their all. He also had a desire to win inside him and to stop being at the bottom of the chain. He hated being

at the bottom. He spat another mouthful, and his vision swayed, but he remained stooped forward.

"Team 21 eliminated!"

"Team 16 eliminated."

Two teams got eliminated while they were still fighting team 1.

"The three teammates are returning. Retreat!" one of the tamelku yelled, and the whole team fell back as Kiuga, Zazarie, and Bukata arrived to aid them.

"You can stop now!" N'varu instructed, coming to hold Sagiri up. Kiuga took in the surroundings, seeing their queen retching blood on both his hands and knees. When their skin made contact, the feeling from yesterday hit Sagiri hard. It was n'varu Neni. He was the one who had stirred the feeling of familiarity within him. He was good enough to hide his presence, yet the power within him did not warn him or call him an enemy. He carried a feeling of nostalgia, and while he had watched him, the feeling of nostalgia. Even when he said you can stop now, it sounded like a command more than a request.

"It was you," Sagiri said, barely a whisper before he fell forward, passing out.

Chapter 34: Chapter 34: DARKNESS

Darkness, just, endless darkness. It felt liquid and heavy all around him as if he was as if he were stuck in liquid darkness. He tried to open his mouth, but the liquid rushed into his mouth, then into his nose and ears. Pain exploded in his every cell, making him want to scream, but every time he tried to scream, more of the liquid darkness entered through his mouth, making his cells burst into even more pain, and the process repeated itself over and over again in an endless sequence.

It felt like he was stuck in nothingness, with no beginning and no end. It went on and on, only a weightless, dark pressure that pressed in from every direction, thick like water but empty of resistance. He did not float. He did not fall. He was held within it as if it were under control, and he could not escape it. Thin, invisible lines wrapped around his wrists, ankles, throat, spine, pulling just enough to keep him stretched, suspended in a posture that was neither standing nor lying. They did not cut. They did not tighten. They just kept him in place tightly.

He could not breathe. The motion happened, but no air answered it. His chest rose and fell in a slow, useless rhythm, like drowning without water. Panic never fully arrived. It had nowhere to take hold. Even fear felt distant, dulled, stretched thin across time. There was no essence of time. It felt like he had been stuck in forever. Moments did not follow one another. They stacked, heavy and unmoving. A second could have been a year. A year might have passed in the space between one thought and the next.

He tried to move his fingers. The command reached them, but the body did not respond. The strings held easily, as if they had motion. there was no sound. Just endless silence that he couldn't hear, even the beating of his own heart. It was like he had only ever experienced sound in his memory, like a distant ringing. Silence filled the space, deep and constant, as the echo left behind after a scream that never happened.

He wondered if he was asleep or if he was dead. The thought drifted, slow and incomplete, then sank before it could settle. Even thoughts drowned here. They surfaced briefly, then slipped back into the dark, unfinished. There was only pain without relief, only suspension in endless darkness.

The stillness did not break for a long, long time. then it raptured. The pain that he had been experiencing till then felt like a whisper compared to what came next. Pain arrived without warning, without source, everywhere at once. Not sharp, not sudden, but vast. A pressure that crushed inward and pulled outward at the same time, as if his body had become a fault line and something ancient was forcing itself through.

The strings holding him tightened violently. Something inside him began to tear. Not his flesh, this pain did not care for flesh. It reached deeper, into the quiet places where thought and feeling lived. His mind fractured in slow motion, stretched thin and peeled apart layer by layer. Every memory, every instinct, every fragile piece of self was pulled, separated, then forced back together wrong. It felt like his very existence was being torn and rearranged.

He tried to scream. The urge was there. The command formed. But his mouth filled with nothingness, thick and suffocating. It poured into him like black water, flooding his throat, his lungs, his chest. He gagged without sound, drowned without air, suffocated without dying.

The pain intensified.

He was being taken apart piece by piece and then put back together, only to be taken apart again. he was pulled into fragments, arms that were no longer, thoughts that no longer belonged to him, emotions stripped down to raw sensation. Then, before he could vanish entirely, he was forced back together.

Again.

And again.

Each time, different. Each time worse. It felt like being shaped by hands that did not understand mercy, molded, broken, remade. The process never finished. It only repeated, endlessly, as if completion itself was forbidden.

Time stretched until it became endless. He did not know how long it lasted. Duration had dissolved. Pain was the only measure left, the only thing that moved. It crawled

through him, rewrote him, hollowed him out, and filled the space with fire. His thoughts splintered into fragments of instinct.

Stop.

Please.

End.

None of them reached anywhere. The drowning deepened. His body convulsed against the strings, useless, trembling, suspended in an agony that had no peak, only continuation. he wished more than anything to pass out, but he was the most conscious he had been experiencing the endless torture. Whatever was doing this had no intention of letting him break free, only of making sure he survived every second of it and experienced every pain.

Lotaga had been watching Team 25 from a distance, especially Sagiri. Everyone in Captain Salka's battalion had been amazed by his sensory skills, and no one had believed his lie about bad hearing. Not even those born deaf could develop sensory skills that far, sensory skills that could feel the accurate presence of thirteen men, especially assassins. Only highly skilled soldiers could hear enemies approaching a few vaara away, and even so, sometimes they couldn't pinpoint the exact number. The boy was special even though he was still weak. He wondered just how powerful he could become. Salka had said to keep what they had seen secret since the boy seemed to want to keep it a secret, but that didn't mean he could not spy on him. The boy had captured his curiosity, and he loved interesting people. Salka was going to kill him if he found out he had been skulking around and being where he shouldn't be.

They all had wondered why they were summoned to pick the boy from the headquarters, and only seasoned veterans and a war titan like Captain Salka were to lead a team. After the ambush, they had finally started to understand. Perhaps someone had their eyes on him and wanted to use his sensory skills to make him a formidable weapon.

He was even more amazed when he pinpointed a silent ambush. It was as if the boy was not affected by the invisibility and smell-impairing gases. his sensory abilities were even better than he had thought. The boy did not have a clan or tribe's name and was raised by adoptive parents, according to his secret file, and he wondered if he was from one of the lost clans that had gone extinct. He had not seen such sensory, not even from the Tamelku tribe of the west. The boy looked bad from the intense training of the past few days, yet he pushed himself. he was the only reason his team hadn't lost against the ambush. he had pinpointed not just the location of the three teams that wanted to ambush them, but their accurate positions. it was as if the boy could see the whole field or sense it. Lotaga smiled, perched on one of the pillars as he watched the scene down below with interest. He had seen many invisibility simulation trainings, yet this one was by far the most interesting. If he and that Kiuga boy, who was a genius

strategist, and Kaka the powerhouse were ever to be put together, they could form a lethal team.

He stumbled on his knees, retching a mouthful of blood from his veins breaking, but he still kept his hand on the earth as if he used his hand to feel. Lotaga wanted to stop the exercise, fearing the boy's heart was going to burst open, but he let it go on a little longer. He was amazed at how the boy was giving accurate commands to his teammates, pinpointing the accurate positions of their opponents while he remained stooped on the ground. He wretched another mouthful, but he still held on. He might have been weak in body compared to his teammates, but his heart was made of stone. Salka had also told him the boy was a genius, absorbing what people read in a week in just a day. Of course, he was not to disclose that, but that made his insides twitch with curiosity. He was going to beg Salka to let him train the boy in core strength exercises so he could stay closer to him.

The other team had not expected that, and even the Tamelku twins were at a loss. They had planned how to subdue them, but in their pride, they had forgotten one person. They had just thought he was weak, but they had not expected his senses to rival theirs. They were not affected by the invisibility gas because of the secret art of their clan, yet they had been bested and rivaled. They withdrew just as the boy collapsed, not able to hold on much longer.

He watched a little longer to see what his teammates could do in such a situation. The exercise was, after all, to teach them about teamwork. The decision they made could decide whether he could let them pass or fail. N'varu Neni was the first to move to him, and he could see clear worry from where he was perched. With the special gear, the gas did not affect any of the monitoring instructors.

"He has fainted!" Zolinka said, crouching beside him, too.

"How weak," Kaka remarked. Yet he turned around to look at the boy who was now slumped on N'varu. Yet Lotaga could only see curiosity in his eyes.

"I assume he overused whatever skill he has to save your asses, but his body is weakened from training to handle whatever his tribe's secret art is." Kiuga made an assumption just by watching. He was a genius at deducing circumstances, and nothing missed his eyes. Blood kept pouring from Sagiris' mouth, together with another substance.

"He looks bad, really bad," N'varu said, looking frantic. "There are still five more teams in the arena. We can't continue with him in this state," He added, and Kaka sneered, hating to throw in the game. The boy could not let anything stop him from winning, and Lotaga watched even more to see what his thoughts could be.

"I agree, let's forfeit," Kiuga said, and there was a sharp intake from everyone thinking of what was at stake. "We shall take a vote then," Kiuga continued.

"I forfeit!" N'varu Neni was the first to announce, not even missing a beat, and his eyes never left Sagiri. The look in his eyes was sorrowful, as if he could not stand to see him in pain. Lotaga was amazed at the boy's display of empathy.

"I forfeit." Zolinka was next.

Ulekai. "I forfeit."

Kiuga. "I forfeit," Kiuga said.

Bukata. "I forfeit!"

It was a tie since Sagiri's vote still counted. The others looked like they were waiting for Kaka to decide before they made theirs.

"Whatever, let's just call the instructor before he dies, and they blame me," Kaka sneered, abandoning his defensive stance. He refused to look at him, however, keeping his gaze forward. Lotaga smirked, watching him struggle with giving in,

"Seems you boys have reached a decision." Lotaga swooped down, landing gracefully.

"Team 25 forfeits the match! Their queen is incapacitated," he announced.

He lifted Sagiri from N'varu's hands, who refused to hand him over at first, but gave him up. He carried him in both his hands, and the team followed closely behind him.

"Will he be okay?" N'varu asked.

"He just burst veins from training too hard, he won't die," Lotaga said, moving fast to the central pentagon, half the team following behind him, of course, Kaka wasn't among them, too proud to show concern, and the four who did vote. Probably ashamed of not forfeiting first.

Chapter 35: Chapter 35: METARMOPHOSIS

Sagiri gasped, sitting up. The darkness and pain that surrounded him had vanished on its own just when he thought it was going to last forever.

"Finally, you are awake," a voice said beside him. Caption Salka was sitting on a chair playing with his dagger, which was moving at the speed of light in his hands. "I thought you for sure died at some point," Salka said, getting up from his chair to approach him.

"What happened?" Sagiri was still disoriented, as he was still in the dark place. "How many days has it been?" It seemed like he had been under for months.

"Days?" Salka looked at him as if he had gone completely crazy before he burst out laughing. "Lotaga brought you in yesterday evening, it's been just a night, you look to have lost a few pounds also, I could say you look like you have lost a few more pounds. Why must you visit this wing every day?" he continued, rolling his eyes as he came to a stop in front of Sagiri's bed.

"Just a night?" Sagiri said softly. He had endured all that suffering in just under a day. he had never been so glad to wake up.

"Yes, you should thank your friend from team 25, too, he insisted on being the one to stay with you and take care of you, even when you were throwing up nasty slime. he even cleaned you up and changed you into your other pair of uniform. I see you have already made a good friend," Captain Salka said, and Sagiri froze.

"Who?" Sagiri's eyes widened at the information. He threw the covers away, taking himself in to find he was covered as always.

"Don't worry, he asked everyone to leave so no one would see your skin condition," Salka said, thinking that was the reason Sagiri was so tense. Sagiri was worried that his secret had been revealed. He could not think of anyone he could consider a friend in Team 25. It could absolutely not have been Kaka, that was for sure. Then he remembered someone who had been watching him and was good enough to hide his presence. He must have let his guard down. Sagiri fell, and in that moment, let his feelings leak through.

'N'varu Neni.'

Sagiri always knew a day could come when someone would know his secret, but he did not expect it to be so soon. If the boy were to blab his secret, that could put him in danger, and even worse if he was sent by his 'benefactor', then that was so much worse. He could have to take strict measures, even if it meant eliminating the boy. Some part of him had always been ready to defend him, no matter what the measures. But the power within him had not warned him. How then could he explain the familiarity he felt and the nostalgia surrounding the boy?

Something else was odd, too. Sagiri's body was back to full recovery. it was as if all the pain he had experienced in the past few days had magically disappeared. Had the boy done that, too? he wiggled his fingers and his shoulders, but he felt brand-new as if he had been reborn.

"What medicine did you give me?" he asked Salka.

"Nothing, you kept throwing up that weird slime of yours, and you couldn't ingest anything. Salka answered. After Lotaga had brought the boy into the healer's wing, he had gone to report to Salka about what he had witnessed on the broken pillars and the shadow arena. Of course, Lotaga was doing so not to earn favour and not get punished

for going outside his jurisdiction. still, Salka had to punish him. The man was a big man-child, and he sometimes wondered why he had him in his battalion. Lotaga was good at tracking, however, and once he had his eyes on a trail, he could not lose the enemy. He was literally a human hound. That was the only reason Salka had not already beaten the guy to death and used his skin to make a scarf. Tracking was not the only reason Captain Salka chose him personally to be on his team. The boy had a good eye for talent, and he was like a talent hound, too, and was a great fighter.

"Senraki wants to see you, too, if you are up for it," Salka said, studying him.

"I feel better, let's go," Sagiri answered, half distracted about all the information and after the dream-like state he had been in. he felt even lighter as they walked to the principal's office. The soreness from the previous day was all gone, and it was like it had never been there at all. He felt lighter as if his body had undergone a metamorphosis and he had been reborn. He did not even tire of walking up the couple of stairs to Zazami Senraki's office. He was buried behind a pile of papers, as usual, his expression grave. It brightened the instant he saw them enter.

"My dear Sagiri, we meet again. "You look skinnier than the last time I saw you, and Salsal tells me you have been to the medical wing three times in the past three days. is the personal curriculum I made especially for you, too much for you?"

"Don't call me Salsal," Salka groaned, launching on another chair in the office.

"It won't help much if you keep collapsing," Senraki continued, ignoring Salka like always. the two were opposites, and Sagiri wondered how they managed to coexist.

"The boy is a genius, Senraki. He can read what other people read in a week in one lesson. Sometimes his body can't keep up with his brain," Salka said, and Sagiri snapped his eyes to him. "I know you asked me not to tell, but it's good that this dump Senraki here knows, so he doesn't overwork you.

"Why would you keep such a good thing from me, Salsal?!" Senraki jumped all the way across the room to Salka and crouched in front of him, clutching Salka's hands. "I knew he had to be special for me to get begged to accept him among the five candidates!" he jumped back, pacing with joy.

"I am going to be famous for my school having the most geniuses," he muttered, rubbing his hands together while cackling, as if he were possessed by the desire for fame. He looked really creepy.

"You are acting creepy, Senraki." Salka groaned, thwarting him across the head. They really were a pair. Senraki stopped mid-laughter, pulling himself together but barely containing himself before he turned around to Sagiri.

"My dear Sagiri, you should have told me that. I could have put one subject per day," he said, coming impossibly close. Sagiri had to step back. How was he the principal of the number one academy while he acted like that?\

"I am okay with the curriculum," Sagiri said, however. He did not want things eased for him just because the archive inside him absorbed knowledge. He had to do a lot of things he needed to do and know, and he did not have time to slack off. Besides, now more than ever, he needed to find out who he was, why he was different, why he wielded a power he did not understand, and why there was a barrier blocking the archive inside him. He had always felt like he was missing a big chunk of information, and he craved for it to be filled. for now, someone had found out his secret, too, and he needed to take measures necessary to keep him from talking.

"I don't think that is a wise decision, boy," Salka said. "If you collapse again, I'll throw you in the hell pool myself this time," Captain Salka said, not agreeing to what Sagiri was saying. His reasoning was right, but he needed to learn as much as he could and train as much as he could, so he could run and get out of Galka Academy if his life was threatened.

"I have to agree with Salsal on this one. if your brain is bigger than your body, then I have to allow for adjustments."

"You said I won't get special treatment and I have to earn the respect of my peers. I will get used to it. Besides, I still have to catch up to the others."

"If you keep collapsing..." Senraki started, but Sagiri cut him off,

"I won't." Sagiri insisted, "I'll train my core to handle the intensity of the training. please allow it."

"How will you train your core by yourself?" Salka groaned, standing to his feet, ready to leave the duo, one thirsty for fame and another thirsty for knowledge, with no care for their health.

"Salsal, you will t..."

"No!" Salka denied quickly. "If the boy can't handle Fuwuka, then he will die under me. I didn't escort him all the way north just to kill him. And Senraki, you should grow up and know where to draw a line."

"Fine. you are so mean, Salsal. You wound my feelings," he started before turning to Sagiri. "If you go a week without collapsing, I will consider keeping the schedule and maybe salka..."

"No, a week isn't enough. Don't drag me into your childish plans." Salka ground his teeth in irritation before he pulled the door open roughly.

"Salsal..." Senraki started, but Captain Salka did not wait for him to speak. He shut the door with so much force behind him, making the walls tremble, leaving Sagiri with an open hand gesture.

Chapter 36: Chapter 36: PENDULUM

Instructors spread out around the arena as they watched the activities unfolding. Sagiri had been allowed to leave the healers quarters right after lunch. He had been forced to eat there and stayed under observation till midday. Senraki had promised to let him keep his schedule if he went a week without collapsing. He was supposed to join the fourth year in the obstacle arena to observe. because he was ill, and partly because he did not yet have the skill set to join the training.

The pendulum field, one of the obstacle arenas, was quite big and filled with obstacles. It is a wide, circular arena. Shallow but cold water covers the entire floor below the stepping beams. Stone platforms and narrow beams rise just above water level, forming multiple paths. Falling into the water because of a lack of balance on the unsteady beams meant a student had to go back and start over. Being struck by a pendulum or an obstacle meant to be subdued meant instant disqualification and, into the suspension chamber or whatever torture chamber Senior Instructor Zoho thought best. He is the obstacle training instructor.

Sagiri entered the arena as the lesson was about to begin. Many students did not realize his arrival. He slid in behind Instructor Zoho and handed him his exemption from the healer's office. he was not to partake in any physical training for the following two days either. Since the students were going in according to classes. Class A was standing at the starting line in a line, ready to charge in. Every class had thirty minutes to get across the arena. Class E was going to be the last, and Kaka was pacing with impatience. He was not, however, who Sagiri was looking for, so he faced forward to look at the obstacle field.

Heavy weights are suspended from chains and cables. They swing, rotate, drop, and rise on timed and irregular patterns. Some move horizontally at chest height, and others sweep low near the legs. Several descend suddenly from above with no warning sound. Those were not the only obstacles on the field. Humanoid training figures were also mounted on tracks. They move continuously around the arena in between the obstacles, some popping out suddenly from above and under. Each has marked vital points. The heart, the throat, the eyes, the kidneys, the spleen, the inner thighs, and between the eyes. The targets rotate and partially shield themselves as they move. Students are issued with two dozen Standard-issue daggers only. Students are required to hit at least a dozen targets before the time runs out while simultaneously avoiding the obstacles and staying steady on some of the unbalanced bars. Missed throws are not replaced. The pendulum field was intense, and Sagiri knew he could have lasted a second on it.

Instructor Zoho placed a whistle between his lips and called the field to order all the junior instructors standing in their respective positions. There was a moment of silence before all hell broke loose. The students moved swiftly, sprinting across beams, jumping between platforms, rolling beneath swinging weights, and diving through openings as obstacles passed. Stopping for more than a few seconds increases the obstacle's speed or the execution of the evasion. It was such a beautiful thing to watch. One student with colorful hair like Daziko, the cheerfully third-year student, probably because they shared a tribe, was hit by a pendulum because of a miscalculated step. Instead of giving in to his fate, he held onto the pendulum with one hand, swinging from it as it went back and forth. While he was still hanging, a target popped up under him. Simultaneously, an unstable bar moved into place.

His eyes moved from the target to the bar and his compromised position. In one leap, he touched both his feet to the pendulum's base to add momentum to his jump. He propelled himself a few feet in the air. Both his hands went to his breast pockets. He retrieved two daggers, their blades glinting in the artificial light of the closed arena. He spun around in the air, getting his weapons into position before he released them in one go, before he landed on the unsteady beam with both his hands and feet. The daggers landed at the same time as him. One disappeared between the eyes, and another the vital spot on the neck. He cheered loudly before he moved on to another obstacle.

The horn sounded once, sharp and final, after thirty minutes, and more than half had made it to the other side. The other half had either been eliminated or failed to make it in time. Class B went almost the same way, but with less than half making it. It seemed that class B was worse off than class A.

Sagiri's concentration upped when class C stepped at the starting line. His target was in class C. N'varu Neni stepped onto the starting line. Sagiri did know why he wanted to watch him. It was not like it was going to give him answers to his questions. The whistle went off, and he moved. He was among the best students in class C. He ran the small distance and jumped onto a stable beam before jumping onto another. A weight swept past where his head had been a second earlier. He dropped instinctively, boots skidding on wet stone, and rolled as another swung low, cutting through the air at knee height.

He was swift in the way that he moved. Not fast but precise. His feet were stable and light as if he was floating when he moved. A target slid into view on his left, torso twisting as it moved along its track. The heart mark flashed between rotating plates. N'varu Neni planted one foot, let the beam sway, and threw. The dagger struck deep, and the target shuddered. He didn't stop. A second dagger flew backward over his shoulder as he jumped, the blade biting cleanly as he landed on the next platform.

He jumped onto a water trough in the arena, and water splashed up his calves. A weight dropped from above without warning. He dove forward, felt the rush of air, and it missed him by inches. He came up under another swing, body folding tight to the ground. He rolled, sprang, and ran as the obstacles accelerated behind him.

Two targets crossed paths ahead. One shielded, one open. He chose the open one, hit the heart mid-stride, then vaulted sideways as a horizontal weight swept through the space he had occupied. Another dagger left his hand while he was airborne, striking the heart mark as he landed hard, boots slipping on the unsteady beam.

He didn't slow.

The final platform rose ahead. Weights converged, moving out of pattern now, and faster than at the start, the obstacles getting more difficult and bars more unsteady. N'varu Neni sank low and waited for a half-breath, then sprinted straight through the narrow gap between two swings, shoulder brushing chain, heart hammering. He reached the exit platform five minutes before the final whistle went off. N'varu Neni was really good, and Sagiri recognized that. He was not as strong and fast as Kaka, but he was still good.

He had not had a chance to talk with the boy, but he needed to have a chat with him and determine if he was worth keeping alive or dead. Sagiri had never killed a person before, but the thought did not scare him or entice him. It was only something he had to do to protect himself.

Soon, it was class E's turn, and Sagiri could not ignore the aggressive feelings that were rolling off of Kaka in waves. He pried his eyes forcefully from the exit N'varu had walked through to sit at the raised watching place where the rest of the class had gone to. He had not pried his eyes off of him since they had found him, and he could not feel his presence yet again as if he had shut them off.

As soon as the whistle went off, everyone moved, but only after a second to allow Kaka to move ahead. No one wanted to stay in his way to avoid being shoved, except, of course, Kiuga. he was running right beside him, his teeth pulled into a smile, probably after saying something to agitate Kaka. Sagiri was wearing his Oru-shells to keep out the noise in the arena, and he could not hear what he had said. Sagiri could not yet understand how the two boys got along, since they were opposites, but he had grown a newfound respect for their relationship, especially after he witnessed how Kiuga defended Kaka. And after he had seen Kiuga's brain in action on the battlefield.

Sagiri had never found a person who did not find him weird and who was willing to stick with him the way Kiuga stuck to Kaka, even though the guy did not have an ounce of the ability to have personal relationships. He always gave off the 'stay away, or I'll kill you energy.'

He moved through the obstacles faster than anyone, and by the time he was halfway, half his daggers were gone, deeply buried either between the eyes and the heart of the targets. sometimes he moved before the daggers landed. He evaded fast, jumped high, landed gracefully even on the uneven bars, threw his daggers with precision, and avoided the moving obstacles with so much accuracy. He was formidable and fast,

moving faster than the obstacles sometimes, as if he was created for the obstacles and not the other way around.

Kiuga was behind him. He was quite swift and light, hanging on pendulums and bars and shooting his targets while he was upside down. Yet he did not miss his backstabber move. He was like a frog and a money at the same time. One was formidable and the other agile, yet they moved at almost the same speed. Sometimes they even aimed for the same target at the same time. Watching them, it did not look like they were in the middle of an exercise or a lesson. It looked fun. They loved and enjoyed the obstacles as if they were a part of their breathing. 'Maybe this is the missing piece I had been missing all along.' Sagiri thought, 'I needed to have fun instead of working in every physical class.

Chapter 37: Chapter 37: TOXICOLOGY

After the class ended, the other 4E fourth-year students could go to a medicine class. Even the medicine classes in Galka Academy's fourth year classes had to do with war, so it was a war medicine study. To know about poisons and antidotes, or how to treat war wounds. It was a class that happened once a week, and it did not require physical activities, so he joined along.

"Hello, boys, I'm Madam Landora Mila Valaku. For those whom we haven't met yet," I had missed a few weeks of school during my transfer, " she was talking to the newcomer. "Since we already did an introduction into the advanced medicine branch, toxicology, I'd like you to follow me to the school gardens for an outdoor class." She smiled brightly, and all the students were quite happy to know that they'd not be sitting in class for another hour. Sagiri could have been happy if it were on another day, but he was going out in this class to follow N'varu Neni around. He did not know yet whether to thank him for taking care of him or eliminate him for knowing his secret

The school gardens were huge. They were situated at the back of the school on the inner part of the outer pentagon, and spread over a few miles. After all, different plants required different ecosystems, and some couldn't grow if planted beside certain plants. It was the duty of plant specialists to create a suitable ecosystem. If they only thrived in an arid place, then they had to be planted on different soil and be kept in vineyard houses that had the same qualities as the desert.

Ms. Landora glided in her ground-touching dress through the garden. She made stops occasionally to teach the class about a plant, its species, and its pros and cons.

"This is the 'shy flower' also known as feleeya," Ms. Landora said, her hair strands flapping away in the sand whenever she stretched her hand to touch a flower head in its yellow pod. She looked outwardly delicate doing that mere act, and everyone swooned, enchanted by her charm.

"It is called the shy flower because not many get to see it bloom. It stays in its pod even after maturing and only comes out one night before it dies. It, however, is a very crucial ingredient for those planning to become war healers. It is a crucial ingredient used in making Traditional anesthesia. It is rare and as mysterious as it is important. If mixed with the Oraliyaa leaves of the Arco tree, however, it can make a perfume for those who want to go into beauty innovations to create strong perfumes like the one I'm wearing." She giggled before continuing to another flower and orchard, and everyone gathered around to get a clear view. Of course, no one in The Galka War Academy was going to venture into beauty innovations, but no one got offended. Even Kaka looked weirdly intrigued, as if she did not understand women or why she looked so delicate yet real. They went against everything he was well except Miss Lakiya.

The flower was a deep purple with small petals. Its scent overpowered that of the plants around it, and it was deviously beautiful.

"This is the devil's breath, also known as eelhagia. Just like its name, it's a very devious flower. It is beautiful, but it is one of the most poisonous flowers. It only grows in cold places, as you can see in the environment of this vineyard house. Just one flower of the devil's breath can be used to make poison that can bring down a horse," everyone moved back instinctively from the devious plant. The reaction made Ms. Landora laugh, her voice like magical bells.

"There is no need for that. It only becomes poisonous once it's severed from its stem. You may wonder then what is the use of such a plant?" She asked, and everyone nodded, wondering the same. "It is a very critical ingredient when making most medicines. It requires meticulous care. Only the best of the best toxicologists know how to turn it into medicine, not poison. Mistakes are not allowed," she said, the last statement with all seriousness, and Sagiri could understand why after hearing her explain it qualified to be called devil's breath. Its smell alone was making him feel more lightheaded.

She floated to the next vineyard house, her long dress dragging behind her, her long hair like a bush around her head filled with flower decorations. She passed by a highly sealed vineyard house and turned around to face the class.

"This is the cursed flower. I will not teach you about this, not until you are at the end of the course and you have received your completion badges," she said with a bright smile.

"Why?" A student asked.

"Because you are still not qualified to know its properties. Only one is in there, and it's dead, yet I advise all of you not to approach that vineyard house," she finished with a bright smile before moving to another tent. No one asked any more questions, but Sagiri could feel their curiosity thick in the air. They entered another vineyard house, which held a vast number of flower species, than the first three.

"This is the Healing Flower or the 'Luneth Reed' she started again, bending low to pluck the Pale blue petals. "It may not seem like it because they look dull now, but they glow faintly at night. It accelerates cell repair, so it is used to close wounds and reduce shock. So everyone should look at it properly, in case you need it later for yourself or your comrade. Of course, I will teach you how to refine it and mix it with other ingredients to make yourself vials, but that is for later classes," she finished, placing the flower in her hair to join the rest of the dozens already in her hair.

"It can also be used to make stamina restoring pills. Most of you have used this to recover after punishment training. I don't advise using it regularly, however, because overusing it can cause internal scarring and weakness." She laughed again, shaking her head. She was like a flower, bright and joyful.

"Have you all heard of the magic flower?" She asked as the class flocked behind her. Everyone replied with a yes, and she turned around swiftly, causing everyone to come to a standstill.

The magic flower, the athalaga grass, I have not seen myself, but it is only restricted to the ruling family. Not even the grand chiefs have seen it. It is said to amplify one's inner strength, making them formidable, and if a person takes it, they can defeat an entire army by themselves. Can you believe that?" Of course, no normal person believed that tale. But if the flower had such power, it was understandable why it was only kept for the ruling family. Holding it could mean one wanted to overthrow a sitting ruler, because what could one possibly use with the strength of a thousand men?

"This is the dark flower she said when they approached a transparent vineyard house, the nokelia veil." Everyone moved closer to the tent, watching from the outside. The flower was red with black petals that absorbed light, and it did not have a scent. It looked even more malicious than the devil's breath. Just looking at it made one want to stay away from it. "In some parts of Tagayia, they call them the wicked flowers. Even so, only high-ranking members are allowed to permit its handling. It can suppress heartbeat sound and even body heat when taken. The user becomes difficult to sense. It is mostly used by the 'silent troops' during assassination and stealth operations. Extended use erodes identity. Users report feeling 'less real' over time. So it's only used mostly as an ingredient to make other medicines and rarely in assassinations."

The lesson came to an end soon after, and it was time for dinner. It was time for Sagiri to talk with N'varu, finally. He served two servings because he was not hungry. His eyes scanned the room, and he found him sitting on the other end alone. He seemed to be a loner. He took a step towards his table and walked to his table. He was about to sit down when Kiuga appeared out of nowhere and snatched him, putting his hand around his neck, dragging him to another table, inviting N'varu in the process.

"Hey, hey, sensory boy, join me for dinner," he started dragging him away to a table where Kaka was already seated, looking gleam, Zazirie, Zolinka, and Bukata were already seated, looking like they wanted to be anywhere but seated with Kaka,

Asakana, the King of Galka. It seemed Kiuga had gathered everyone from team 25. Well, those who had forfeited, except Ulekai. Kiuga kept scanning the dining wing, however, as if he was going to find him.

"Don't be shy, kaka doesn't mind," he laughed, dumping Sagiri in a chair. Kaka was seated with a grave expression that screamed, 'get away from me,' but Kiuga ignored it.

"What a coincidence that we get to gather here again," he said again. He was the only one who looked happy at the whole table. Everyone else was on edge. "Now we wait for Ulekai before I formally introduce myself and my dear friend Kaka Asakana Bami, the king of Galka," he finished, looking over to find Ulekai before he yelled his name across the hall, going against all the dining rules.

"Ulekai! Over here."

NUMBER 1: No talking while you are eating.

He was quite a complex character.

Chapter 38: Chapter 38: KEEPER

"I am sorry that you had to forfeit the game for me, costing you a mark." Sagiri started after everyone was seated, but no one spoke. He could not feel any feeling of hostility coming from any of them except Kaka, who always oozed hostility.

"N'varu didn't tell you?" Kiuga said with a full mouth. Kaka was wolfing down his food, not caring to give any of them a shred of his attention. Sagiri and N'varu's eyes met across the seat, and an emotion passed on his brow before he looked away. He had successfully hidden his feelings, and he couldn't perceive what they were.

"Tell me what? Sagiri asked, moving his gaze back to Kiuga.

"Our team passed, and it's all because we forfeited because a teammate was hurt. So, even though we did not stay until the end of the game, we showed quick decision-making by forfeiting an important game to take care of an injured teammate.

"Is that so?" Sagiri said, feeling oddly warm, that they decided to go to such lengths for him. "I will become stronger so I don't pull you all down next time, even so," he added, feeling obligated to do better.

"What are you even talking about?" Zolinka almost jumped over the table. "You were awesome out there, like you could see even with the invisibility gas! Like when you told me someone was coming my way and I couldn't see anything, I just followed your words and punched the air and landed!" he was totally over the top. He was almost jumping from his seat.

"Yes, newbie, you are good. " Kiuga joined in. "How did you even know there was an ambush?" he asked, and he only oozed curiosity.

"Yes, Sagiri, how did you know? You are not a Tamelku, but you even had them tensed." Ulekai added with admiration in his eyes. N'varu looked tense, but he remained silent.

"I have bad hearing," Sagiri answered. Everyone stared at him hard, wanting him to elaborate more. "I have had bad hearing since I was a kid, so I learned to use my other senses more," he repeated the lie he had told Captain Salka and his men. There were a couple of underwhelming emotions flying around after his answer. Some sighed, and some wished he were more interesting. N'varu was among those who sighed.

"You have bad hearing," Kiuga asked, surprised.

"Yes," he answered. "I use this to hear," he pushed back his hood slightly to show them the oru-shells before pulling it over his face.

"Still, it was awesome. Our team could have made it that long in that arena without your senses," Kiuga said, and Sagiri nodded, digging into his food, shutting out whatever emotions were swirling around, focusing on his own.

"Eating two servings is a disgrace," Kaka said in disgust, standing from the table, having cleared his dozen servings.

"Don't mind him, he was the first to forfeit," Kiuga said, and Kaka groaned and threw his plate at him, but Kiuga dodged it, and the two chased each other out of the hall.

"He was actually the fifth to forfeit," Ulekai whispered, leaning across the table as if he was scared anyone could hear him. So Kaka was not as cold as he seemed. He just hated showing any weakness. Sagiri thought, feeling relieved that he was not on the bad side of such a guy. N'varu left on his own soon after, and Sagiri missed the chance to talk to him yet again.

Sagiri had, however, been told to take it easy, not to exert his mind. He also wanted to earn Salka as his teacher, so he had to play it safe. He headed to the first-year Pentagon Library to study Tagayia Language Study, a compulsory subject among the twelve. He could speak several languages, but the archive inside of him still craved more.

He settled on studying more northern dialects, especially the Tamelku tribe language, which he did not know. He opened the book, and the language seemed familiar. The archive did not need to concentrate to absorb the language as if it were its second nature, as if it had created the language. He was still serving punishment since he missed a day, and so, with a few hours to spare, he headed for the combat arena to train with the dagger.

Just like the other day, Kaka was still training as hard as before, launching daggers while punching, kicking, and dodging at the same time. He was especially vicious in his training, evading even more invisible targets. He released daggers at the targets with eyes closed as if he was recreating the fight from the previous day, where they could not use their eyes to find enemies. He really was admirable in how he worked hard in places where he lacked and rectified his mistakes. He did not turn to acknowledge Sagiri, just like the day before yesterday.

Sagiri moved in front of the human dummy, positioning himself. He sank into an attacking stance, then unsheathed his dagger before he started moving. He moved just like Instructor Bekuro had told him. Attack, side step. jump back, turn around, attack again. He tried to make the weapon move to his will, but he dropped it each time. He tried again and again, but the result was the same.

"You are holding it the same way, and you are too rigid. You are obeying the dagger instead of making it obey you," a voice said behind him, and he jumped before he turned around. Sweat was pouring from his face, and he had been concentrating for a long time. He got lost in it. It was the last person he had expected to see. Kaka Asakana was standing behind him with a sour expression as if it had been painful for him to endure watching him make clumsy moves.

He snatched the dagger from Sagiri's hand and reenacted the move instructor Bekuro had made so swiftly and seamlessly, it was as if he were another Instructor Bekuro standing in front of him.

"Watch me carefully, then repeat," he turned around, giving Sagiri a strict look. "Or get out of my sight!" he snapped, then repeated the move slowly.

He moved quickly, aiming for the throat, but halfway, he dodged an imaginary enemy, released the dagger, moved his hand downward in the same move, caught it sinking lower, before he stabbed it at the vital spot between the thighs. He threw the dagger at Sagiri and moved back.

"Now move!" he commanded, seeming as if he was at the end of his rope with him. Sagiri took a stance in front of the human straw, but Kaka spoke again. "Attack me, those things don't fight back," he said, and Sagiri remembered how Instructor Bekuro had told him not to hesitate

Sagiri adjusted his grip and tried again. He barely moved before Kaka blocked, hooked the wrist, and pushed Sagiri's shoulder. Sagiri stumbled. Kaka moved his foot with his own boot. One inch back. Then another.

"You're holding the blade wrongly," he seethed before he adjusted his hand around the handle.

"Again!" he commanded, getting into

position again. Sagiri attacked again. This time, the blade stayed straight. The step followed the strike. Kaka let it pass.

"Good. Again."

They repeated the sequence. Over and over. Correction by contact sometimes and by explanation sometimes. After several rounds, Sagiri's movement stopped breaking apart. Still slow. Still rough. But functional.

"Now repeat on your own."

Kaka stayed and watched him for a while, his expression solemn as always. Even so, Sagiri could feel himself finally become one with the weapon. Kaka had made him understand what he had been missing, and although his body had not caught up, he dropped the dagger less and less.

When it hit twelve and the gong sounded, Kaka just left without saying a word. Sagiri continued on his own. His body had healed completely, and he felt lighter. He trained for a few minutes on his own, then suddenly the skin at the back of his head rose to attention. He could not see him, but he knew he was there.

"Come out now!" he growled, pushing his hood back, his eyes scanning the whole arena. There was no movement, and he let the power inside of him come alive, and the arena floor shook slightly.

"N'varu, I know it's you. Come out!" he said. There was a blur of movement so light and fast that he had never seen. N'varu came to a stop in front of him, his eyes completely white. The black in his eyes was invisible. He could only see the white that covered the. He blinked, and they went back to normal. Sagiri could still not perceive any hostility from him, and he maintained his aggressive stance. He could just feel that nostalgia hanging around him so thick that it almost brought him to his knees.

"Keeper, I greet you." N'varu suddenly said, falling to one knee, one hand touching the earth and another resting on the bent knees. He bowed his head so deeply. Sagiri could only feel respect and longing coming from the guy. he stepped back, surprised by the whole act. He had never had someone bow to him or show him such respect, which he did not deserve, yet he felt familiar with the movement.

"As one of your sworn guardians, I failed to find you and only waited to die upon my return. Please accept my apologies."

"What did you do to me?" Sagiri ignored his blubbers, yet he felt uneasy. "I was clearly weak and beaten when I passed out. How did you make it go away?" Sagiri asked, his tone defensive.

"I am not your enemy, you can search my mind if you fear so," he said in one beat, and Sagiri froze. The power inside him stirred, and he sent him flying into the opposite wall. The right eye defied the eye veil, turning red. His head hurt immediately, but he ignored him and walked to where N'varu now hunched on his arms and legs, breathing heavily.

"Were you sent by the benefactor to kill me. How does he know that? What does he want from me?" Sagiri raged, ignoring the honesty radiating off the boy. He was telling the truth, yet Sagiri did not want to believe him.

"I was not sent by anyone. I have already told you to search my memory, keeper." N'varu repeated without an ounce of anger in his voice. "If you find any betrayal in them, then you can kill me, keeper. Protecting you is my sworn duty, and dying by your hand will also be my honour." Sagiri swayed on his feet, the power draining him of any strength in his body, bringing him to his knees. Sagiri could have just touched his hand to his head to read his memory, yet he didn't. It was as if now that he was faced with the truth, he did not want to believe him.

"I can tell you don't have the memories, but you are the veil keeper," N'varu said with the same tone as if he was not spitting a mouthful of blood. "I am willing to teach you until you regain the memories."

"Stay away from me," Sagiri said, trying to get to his shaky feet.

"You can deny it, but you know I was not the one who healed you," N'varu said, spitting another mouthful of blood before he stood to his feet. "I only took care of you because after your careless display on the broken pillar and shadow arena, I feared you might lose control." Sagiri went silent. N'varu was making sense, and he wondered whether they already knew each other. He could feel the invisible barrier in his mind when he tried to remember. he had always known he was missing something, but he was not stupid enough to believe mere words from a boy he had just met days ago.

"What are you going to do with this information?" Sagiri asked, standing to his feet.

"I have already told you to search my memory," N'varu answered, standing to his feet. "I could have avoided your clumsy attack right now, but I didn't. I could have killed you in your sleep, but I didn't. You are so weak right now, even a first year at Galka can kill you. the power within you, you still don't know how to wield it, it will kill you before you kill anyone if you don't learn to control it. I will talk with you another time when you are not acting like a child," N'varu lectured. He sounded a bit mad and a bit too mature for his age.

He left just as quickly as he had arrived in a blur, and Sagiri wondered why he hid some of his skills to appear average. He had also called Sagiri foolish for his display. It was as if he was trying hard to hide who he was and what he was capable of, and on that, he was the same as Sagiri.

"Punishment complete," Instructor Torena said, getting off his raised spot at the door. Even so, he did not care much about that.

Keeper? Why did N'varu address me as the keeper?

Chapter 39: Chapter 39:THE SASH HANDING OVER CEREMONY

The ceremony arenas above the pentagons were wide. They stood built into the smooth roofs of the pentagons. The four ceremonial arenas. They are only used during competitions across high schools, or the sash handing over ceremonies. The whole school gathered on the ceremonial arena above the first-year pentagon. Students dressed neatly, and their weapon pockets were filled with knives and daggers. The second year cadets carried spears, the third year cadets carried bows and arrows, and the fourth year cadets carried words. The only common weapon among the three classes was the two dozen knives in the side and breast pockets.

Galka Academy took the sash handing over ceremony seriously, and all the instructors gathered. From the junior instructors, senior instructors, section commanders, and captains. Even Principal Zazami Senraki looked pretty decorated, with all the military honors sitting on his white combat uniform and coat. The instructors sat in positions according to their rank, and the students sat according to their years of service. Captain Salka and Fuwuka stood behind Senraki, looking solemn as if reminiscing about their sash-handling over the ceremonies. This was the most important sash handing over because it symbolized the graduation from a civilian to a cadet.

The sash on the waist of every year stood out neatly giving a sense of tension in the air as if something important was going to take place, which was the truth. On this day, the first years could get acknowledged not just as mere rocks in the dirt but polished gems who were ready to become future warriors and soldiers of Tagayia.

Displine Division Commander Torena Xemira was the first to take the stage.

"Cadets! honour position!" he announced, and all the students apart from the first years took their honorable positions. Knees hit the concrete in unison, shaking the entire arena.

"Warriors Creed!" He announced, and all the cadets recited the creed just as powerfully as the first time he had heard it. Since he was the only aged student, he had experienced a sash handing over ceremony, and he was the only one experiencing it for the first time. Not only that, but he was the only one with an ash-gray sash in the midst of the crimson reds, making Torena's eyes twitch. The man loved perfection, and anything disorderly could result in the most severe of punishments.

"Cadets! Respectable positions!" He announced, and all the cadets across the years rose to their feet, legs apart and one hand thumbing their hearts. He stepped back from the platform, letting the ceremonial division commander take the stage. Galka Academy,

being a military school, did not include any unnecessary pleasantries. Even ceremonies take the shortest time possible.

The ceremonial division commander, Wokira Ogiri Tiwesani, took the stage. His hair was the same as Daziko's in the third year, but with even more decoration that you couldn't see his hair. It was only fitting for one of the Tiwesani Tribe to hold the position of ceremonial commander. They were flashy, and they loved beautiful and flashy things. Their tribe has so many ceremonies to celebrate everything and anything. They believe ceremonies bring people together and colour brightens hearts. They weren't completely wrong because the moment Wokira took the stage, the tense environment seemed to relax.

"I am Wokira of the Tiwesani tribe, " he announced, and someone groaned. It had to be Captain Salka. He hated anything too flashy, and sitting beside Senraki, who was a man-child, and Wokira, who was too flashy and colorful, was too much for him. Even Torena looked like he wanted to stay as far away as possible. "We shall first welcome the second-year cadets to perform the spear warrior dance. Then the third year warrior bow and arrow dance, and then we will wrap it up with the fourth year warrior sword dance!" He announced with the brightest smile Sagiri had ever seen. It was as if the definition for smiling had been derived from the guy. It was so wide it was creepy.

"Please make sure to put in your best and entertain me. Let me see how much you enjoy ceremonies. Remember to smile. This is a happy ceremony, and we will remember it for the rest of our lives."

The second year cadets entered first to step into the open space at the centre of the arena. They took positions in lines without any instructions. They held long brown spears with forest-green bows to match their sash, upright, feet planted wide. They stood for a moment as if waiting for a command, then they moved in unison without anyone giving a command. Their movements were grounded and heavy. Yet beautiful as if it were a dance, yet so vicious it showed their love for the weapon. Spears struck the floor in rhythm, then swept outward in controlled arcs. Thrusts were direct, meant to break lines and hold ground. Every step emphasized reach, formation, and discipline with no wasted motion. The dance showed how the spear had a life of its own, and how when its will and that of the weapon wilder joined together, they moved like one. Sagiri could now understand why Fuwuka made him carry it while he ran. It was not a punishment. The man loved the spear, and Sagiri could only perceive pride reeking off of him as he watched the ongoing dance.

Even when the dance ended, they stood on the platform for a moment before they bowed in respect and stepped out of the arena in one organized line. Sagiri could feel Torena bursting with pride at their uniformity, even though he kept that grave face.

The third-year cadets were next to step on the platform. Their bows and arrows are decorated with midnight blue bows to match their sash. Unlike the second-year cadets, they moved so silently that if you were not looking, you would miss them. There was no

stamping, no noise. Their steps were light and spaced. They stood in neat disk-like rows. Just like the second-year cadets, they stood for a moment as if waiting for a silent command before they moved in unison as if connected by invisible strings. There was indeed a big difference in their moves that made the second-year cadets look like amateurs. Standing in shooting positions, they mimed drawing bows, turning at sharp angles, shifting levels as if moving through terrain. Arrows were loosed in precise sequences, high, low, distant, close. The dance focused on timing, positioning, and awareness. It showed control of distance and the killing of enemies before they could close in. More so, it showed the love of the weapon. The weapon was not only made for killing, but handling it was an art.

The fourth-year cadets came last. Their swords hung in their sashes with crimson red bows hanging at the hilt. Sagiri had not even been introduced to the basics of using a sword, and he could only stand in the fourth year's section alone with his out-of-place ash gray sash, making him stand out like a sash. Torena's eye twitched again, and he looked like he wanted to erase his existence from his view. He was ruining his perfect view of discipline and order. They carried sheathed swords. Just like the other years, they took their positions in the middle of the arena in neat rows and stood for a moment as if waiting for an invisible command. When they finally moved, Sagiri could only perceive awe from everyone watching. Unlike the third-year cadets, the fourth-year cadets didn't move as if held together by an invisible string. They moved as if they were made of one body. They moved like one entity. They unsheathed their swords in a swift move, their sharp blades reflecting the glares of the sun. Their movements were fluid and fast, changing direction without warning. Cuts flowed into thrusts, guards into counters. They did not follow a fixed rhythm. Each motion responded to an imagined opponent. The dance was individual, not formed. It showed adaptability, lethal precision, and finishing intent. They jumped and landed at the same time, shaking the very foundation of the first-year Pentagon. The dance was lethal and yet beautiful. When they stopped, blades were already lowered, as if the fight was long over.

This time, the most admiration poured from Principal Senraki. It was as if he were reminiscing. His feelings of love for the weapon surpassed everyone's in the arena. He, as the principal, was the only one with a designated seat, yet he stood and watched the dance with dancing hearts in his eyes as if he wished he could join them.

"Beautiful, just beautiful!" Wokira announced, disrupting everyone's solemn moment. He ignored everyone's groans this time and continued in his loud voice that was tearing the now silent arena to shreds. "Now, then, I will invite the bride of this groom to the stage to receive the youngest cadet's sash. It is the moment we have all been waiting for. A sinking door opened right in the middle of the arena, giving birth to the first-year. Cadets to be. They appeared in tight yet clumsy lines compared to what Sagiri had just witnessed.

They formed a tight block, ash-gray sashes visible against their uniforms. Instructors took positions along the inner edges. Weapons were ceremonially sheathed, polished, unused. Their ceremonial coats were longer than the usual combat coats. They swept

behind them, making them look even more powerful. Senraki stood at the centre of the stage, facing them with Captain Salka and Captain Fuwuka standing beside him

A command rang out. It was Captain Salka. "Recruits kneel!"

The first year recruits knelt as one, right fist pressed to the chest.

Another command followed. It was Captain Fuwuka. "Recruits Creed!"

They recited the Recruit Creed first. Short. Harsh. Words about endurance, obedience, and survival. Their voices echoed upward into the open space of the wing. Without a pause, they followed it with the First-Year Mottos. Statements drilled into them since arrival. Then came the Galka War School Creed. Then the warrior's creed. The most important creed.

"We are the sons of Galka. Forged in hardship, discipline, and purpose. Our minds are sharp, our bodies unyielding, our loyalty bound to our unit and our code. We rise with honor. We train without fear. We endure without complaint.

"Strength is our duty. Unity is our shield. Victory is our destiny. Pride is our armor

"We stand as one. We kneel as one. We fight as one.

"Galka does not raise boys. Galka raises weapons."

Every student in the wing joined in this one. Upper years spoke it without raising their voices, a low, unified sound that filled the structure. It was older than any of them. When the last line ended, silence returned immediately. Senior instructors stepped forward.

"Sash exchange!" It was Instructor Torena.

The ash-gray sashes were untied and removed. Each was taken without ceremony and placed into a waiting basin at the center. No one watched the cloth once it left their bodies. Deep brown sashes were issued next. Each student stepped forward when their name was called, accepted the sash, tied it themselves, and stepped back into formation. When the final sash was tied, instructor Torena spoke again. The students' uniform was under the discipline code after all.

"You are now first-year cadets of the Galka War School Academy," they took the respect position, fists to their hearts in honour of the honour that had been bestowed on them. Finally, it was Principal Senraki's turn to give a speech, and he had been waiting for this moment a long time.

"As the principal of the Galka War Academy, I officially welcome you to the ranks of cadets. I know most of you dream to be like me in the future, and this is only the first step." Even Sagiri could hear Captain Salka's eyes rolling to the back of his head. He just could not wait to make it about himself and take their achievement as his own. "Remember from now on whatever you do reflects on me, and remember to make me proud in whatever you do. I am most proud of you because I have watched you grow, and I have made sure to train you and nurture you from little chicks to the eagles you are now. Of course, I haven't trained you personally, but all the instructors carry my will, and they pass it to you. You are all my students, and I wish you only the best from here on out until you become just like me." Salka was holding himself back at that point, not to beat him to a pulp.

Chapter 40: Chapter 40: DILEMA

The two days Sagiri was barred from physical training had finally come to an end. His schedule was back to normal, except for his sitting arrangement in the dining wing. He was either accompanied by Zolinka or Ulekai. Sometimes, Kiuga forced them to sit together with Kaka, and in those times, he had to eat more than three servings. Even those still received scornful looks from Kaka, but he kept quiet and minded his business, leaving all the chitchat to Kiuga.

Since he hadn't joined physical practice for three days, he used the time to study as much as possible. He had managed to finish the second year compressed study, and he was halfway through the compulsory units taught in the first year in those days. Without the exhaustion from physical study, he did not need much to catch up. The only thing he struggled with was still combat.

He was bursting with strength just remembering the weapon dances. He wanted to be able to move with such vigour. Apart from the theoretical subjects, which he only needed two more weeks to finish, he delegated a whole week to Tagayia languages. Then he would use that time to study fiscal fitness, weaponry, and combat.

The morning started just as usual, with Torenna leading the meditation. Sagiri had finally finished a week and a half in Galka War Academy, and the grueling schedule had become like second nature to him. He took off running to the first-year combat arena. He was not alone in the arena this time. It was packed full of first-year cadets who now wore their deep brown sashes. He was the only one wearing the ash-gray sash, and he stood out across all years. The first year had been wearing the ash gray. This was a day ago when they graduated, leaving only him in the recruits category.

Till they could officially become cadets, they could only study physical fitness. They could now officially start their study in combat. Sagiri, on the other hand, could have to study. joined them standing in the last row.

"I see you look happy to have moved up from mere recruits to cadets. That, however, does not mean anything!" Fuwuka started standing on the raised platform in the middle

of the arena, looking at them like they were nothing. "If you fail to improve in your core strength and stamina, and show improvement, you will be forced to repeat the same year. And as you know, anyone that does not make improvements in a year does not belong in Galka War Academy and will have to be culled," he continued.

No student has ever failed to show improvement in the history of Galka because only those capable enough could secure a spot. Only the best 250 students by Galka requirements each year could join the Galka Academy. They had to be fit and show at least prowess in one weapon. Sagiri could have possibly failed the Galka War Academy entry exam, yet here he was.

"I will be your combat instructor till your fourth year. I don't tolerate laziness, tardiness, and lack of progress," he continued, looking at Sagiri. "Now get in formation. I want you to run 10 laps around the arena. After each lap, you are to run to the centre of the arena, do fifty pushups, and then repeat."

"Move!" he announced, and the crowd of students immediately moved. Within no time, Sagiri was at the last of the group, and Fuwuka's eye twitched. Sagiri was not as sore as the week before, and he could already feel improvement inside of him, even though it was a little. He was not panting for breath as much or feeling as if his heart was going to shatter. Whatever N'varu had done to him while he passed out had not only improved his stamina a little bit but also renewed his body strength. He tried to keep up, but he was still the last of the group. He realized how bad his core strength was after three laps and 150 pushups.

"This is just physical fitness! Get a move on!" Fuwuka announced, and they all answered in unison.

"Yes, captain!" the voice echoed around the whole arena. After three more laps and 150 more pushups, Sagiri was out of breath. However, he was not going to give up this time, even with his lungs burning. He was still two laps behind when the others finished. By the time he completed the ninth lap, the breakfast gong had already gone off, and the others gave their respect salute to Commander Fuwuka before leaving. Sagiri's muscles burned, and his heart was beating out of his chest. Fuwuka remained still watching him, almost expecting him to fall forward, spitting blood. After the display Sagiri witnessed in the ceremonial arena, however, he knew that slowing down was not an option. He pushed himself to finish the last round and pushed himself to finish the fifty pushups even with shaking hands.

He barely had any strength to give a respectful salute to Fuwuka before he fell forward flat on the ground. He did not have the luxury to stay unmoving. He dragged his tired body to the fourth-year Pentagon. The only difference was that he made it to the dining hall this time before the assembly gong sounded. The serving time was over, and some students had already finished eating. He stood by the door wiping his sweat. It was an improvement, but he was still behind. He was about to turn around and leave, but a voice called out to him.

"Keeper." He had not seen N'varu approach, but he was standing beside him. "I served you a portion. I knew you would be late again, he said, pointing at a table where he must have been previously sitting. There was an untouched serving of food. He turned around to tell him to stay away from him, but he was already gone. He looked between the now-empty doorway and the delicious, welcoming serving of food for long moments, unmoving. He was contemplating whether to go ahead and eat the welcoming food or to leave and go hungry again. He did not trust anyone yet because he was targeted by an invisible enemy. N'varu had, however, made sense when he said that he was not his enemy, and if he had wanted to kill him while he slept. Even the combat class with the first years had made clear the glaring fact that he was physically worse off than any first year. If he wanted to kill him with his stealth movements and strength, he could just attack him while he was unaware and kill him. Even if he used his power to attack, it could still end the same. He had said he could dodge it and kill him. It's not like he had stolen some dark flower and slipped it in his food. or had he?

It took everything in him to turn away from the steaming food and head to the assembly ground on an empty stomach yet again. The day was pretty much like the last week, but he seemed to have built a resistance. He walked into the second-year library and pushed himself to study, but on an empty stomach, he could not achieve as much as he wanted. He wished he could have eaten the food, but eating food made by your enemy was the most foolish thing to do. He walked into the third-year library, and since he was already done, he moved to other topics that were not in the syllabus. He could study anything and everything that he could get his hands on. He had a lot he needed to know, and perhaps one book could teach him how to undo the barrier in his mind. By the time lunchtime arrived, he was famished, and he gulped down the food before heading to Miss Lakiya's class. She was making the teams play a game of tag of war this time.

This time, it was not team against team. It was class against class. All they did in her class was play games, and it kept everyone on their toes. She always came up with new games, and it was scary and exciting at the same time. She was standing in the middle of the area when the fourth year cadets gathered around her.

"Boys, you kept me waiting," she said with a wicked grin on her face. It was as if she arrived early because she just enjoyed the taste of adrenaline oozing off teams as they competed for the win. The games might have looked innocent, but when no one standing in the arena loved to lose, then it was a battle. With each game, the boys kept growing farther and further apart as if the self-interest in them kept growing. It was as if her class was meant to do the opposite of what it was supposed to do. It was dividing classes and teams instead of building team spirit. It made everyone wary of each other, and teams with stronger opponents were frowned upon.

"Cadets, apologize!" all the students sang in unison, making the grin on her face grow even wider. She caressed a very thick white rope going around her thin waist a dozen times, some of it still trailing behind her.

"Why do you boys look so on edge?" she started caressing the rope lovingly. "It's not like you hate my games, do you?" She asked, her sad tone not matching her wicked grin.

"As you can see today, I am not in the company of other instructors, which only means the game today is easy to let you relax from the previous game and unwind. The game today will not include earning points. It is just to build team morale. For those who did not earn any points, don't worry, we still have many games to play before your midterm in three months, and many mini-tests in between that will award you points." Her voice echoed sharply, intimidating, filling the whole arena.

"Today we just played a simple game of tag of war," she said, and some held breaths were released, yet there were still anxious feelings and looks hanging in the air. No game suggested by her could be that simple. What she loved more than making her students play games was playing mind games.

"Here are the rules for the game!"

"Today the game will be according to streams. Since I don't want to make any team feel left out, all streams will play four games. The team which loses two of the four games is directly disqualified. For each of the two teams competing, the opposite team has to choose a member of the opposite team to compete in hitting the bulls eye. The team that doesn't hit the bulls eye gets to lose a member of the other teams choosing. No member can get chosen twice for the bow and arrow however.

"Now according to classes you have five minutes to read on the board the order of games"

A-B

C-D

D-E

B-C

E-A

D-B

C-A

E-C

A-D

B-E

"Team A and B, chose the other team's member you want to compete in archery."