

# **THE LAST KEEPER #Chapter 51: HIS BEGINNING II**

## **- Read THE LAST KEEPER Chapter 51: HIS BEGINNING II**

### **Chapter 51: Chapter 51: HIS BEGINNING II**

"Where have you been, Kero?" his grandmother's shaky voice asked. She was sitting in her usual spot at the corner of the tribe shaped huts. She had heard the boys his age call him the name once when he had just arrived at the clan. She had scolded them and promised to lay her walking stick on their undisciplined butts if they called him that again. The boy had cried for a long while, and his great-grandmother had sat with him before the fire for a long while till he stopped weeping. The event never stopped, however, and the boys made even worse nicknames for him every time he cried. Then one day when his grandmother had been tired of consoling him she had sat him down and told him to make his weakness a strength. to embrace all names and to never cry when he was bullied.

"I will call you kero too from today. When it comes from me, it will mean you are a gift to me. so don't cry when they call you Kero, just think of what it means to me." His grandmother's words had not made sense, but he had pushed himself to stop crying when they called him kero."Wear the name like a badge of honour." His great grandmother had repeated to him.

Soon, he had stopped minding their name-calling, and every time he did not cry, their anger towards him could rise. It should have made him scared, but he was proud of himself for not giving in to their provocation. That is when the beatings had begun. Even then, he had made a point to never cry. Again.

"Kero, don't cry every time someone chooses to hurt you. Crying shows weakness and gives power to your assailant. So laugh or ignore them," his grandmother had said that to him when the beatings had begun. She had tried to report it to the traditional school teachers, but even they could not do anything against the sneaky boys. Punishing them could only go so far, and they could still bully him outside of school.

"I was training late," he answered his great-grandmother as he limped further into the house. The old lady had not completely lost his sight to be blind to the swelling around his eye and the blood trickling down his mouth.

"I can see you limping, you know. My sight might be bad, but I am not a totally blind child."

"It is nothing. I just fell," he said, the same lie he always did.

It was either '*I fell*', or '*it is nothing*.'

"Clean yourself up, then. There is food in the pot," she said in her shaky voice. She should have been hurt that the boy was hiding his pain from him, but she was not long for this world, and she could not be able to take care of him forever. She already had one foot in the grave and could only wish the boy could get into a high school so he could get away. His nephew had turned out to be a vermin, and all she could do was take care of the boy. Perhaps it is my fault I raised my son wrong, who, in return, raised a good-for-nothing, she always lamented and spat at her misfortune.

Kero was an outstanding boy, and if he had had a better upbringing from a young age, he could have been stronger than any boy. It was still not too late with the rate at which the boy was pushing himself. He had not let his past cripple him, and even with his body smaller and weaker than anyone he was still at the top of the class in the study subjects. His body failed him in the art of war and body fitness, but that had not kept the boy from trying.

Kero woke up before dawn, and after stuffing his face with what was left in the pot, he went for a run in the woods. Down south, he had learned the art of the hunt from outside the class because he was not allowed to mix with those of the Anki clan. He was shunned even there. That had still not stopped. He was an outsider wherever he went.

He carried his wooden sword with him and practiced against the back of a tree. He also punished himself with core building exercises whenever he missed. He did not want to go to just any high school. To wield real power, he needed to go to a war academy. War generals were more respected than healers, philosophers, historians, or even innovators. Besides, the other practices could not help him cause real pain to those who had afflicted him. He had come to accept that he was an outsider, and apart from his great-grandmother, he hated everyone and the world at large with so much venom. He wished all of it could burn as he watched. He had never known anything apart from pain, rejection, and more rejection since he could remember.

One thing he had more than his peers who bullied him was that he was hungriest. They wanted to join a military school because it is their way of life, but he wanted to join because he had to. There was no other path for him. He wanted to join a war academy more than all of them. They might have been stronger, but his hunger exceeded theirs. and the hungriest always won. not the most talented, not the strongest, but the hungriest. He only had six months left till the academy joining trials, and he was going to join. not just any war school, but the number one war school, The Galka War Academy. He was going to join it, then go to war college, and he was not going to stop until he became the best of the best.

He chose the same tree every day, its bark scarred from old cuts. He bowed once, not out of respect, but habit, then began. He wielded the wooden sword in his hand and breathed in. Some did it to calm down and concentrate, but he did it to summon his rage and anger.

The sword struck the trunk again and again. Straight cuts first. Slow, controlled. Each swing ended exactly where it should, even when his arms burned. He practiced footwork in the dirt, stepping in, stepping out, keeping his balance low. When his grip slipped from sweat, he tightened it and continued. When dawn broke, and the sun rose, his hands were raw. He rested only long enough to breathe, then resumed, practicing blocks against an enemy that existed only in his head. He imagined strikes coming from taller boys, heavier bodies, stronger arms. He blocked and struck with the intention to kill. He wanted those who had harmed him to cease to exist.

He only went home to eat breakfast, which was already prepared by his grandmother, before heading to hell. That is what his clan's traditional school was for him. No matter how much he trained during the day with his teachers, he always made sure to train a bit more at night. He could afford to relax.

At night, he returned.

The air was cold at night. His muscles ached. He could barely lift the sword most nights because of his weak bones, but he did anyway. He was not going to submit to his weakness even if it meant he had to crawl or slither to reach his goal. This time the training was quieter. Short movements. Precision. He struck the same spot on the tree until the sound of impact changed, until the wood gave slightly under repeated hits. He had to tie his hands with gauze to reduce the impact, yet he used all the force he could master, no matter how much he bled. He was a deranged child with a weapon. Kero did not care for his well-being anymore. The only thing that drove him was his need to be strong and pay in full what he had suffered.

When his arms finally failed, he leaned his forehead against the bark and stayed there, breathing through the pain. The tree did not mock him for his weakness. It did not laugh. It only stood and endured. So he did the same. When the moon climbed high, he lowered the sword, hands shaking, and walked back without looking behind him.

That was his routine for the remaining days till the main high school trials. The trials were free for everyone to join, and him being the best in the studies section, he had bought himself a spot. No matter how much he was despised, that was something a tribe chief could have allowed to happen. After all, the performance of the tribe brought him honour. Many expected him to join a philosophy academy like Lokuza Spirit School or Tisaro Arc Academy, but he had a completely different direction in mind. He wanted to join a war school, and so he could only join in the fitness and art of war trials.

The day had finally come, and he stood with his peers in the Exam Council Headquarters. After meeting other contenders from other tribes of the north, he had almost faltered. Some tribes, like the Bami tribe's twelve and thirteen-year-olds, looked sixteen. They made the biggest boy in his clan look normal. That should have scared him, but it made him happy to see how small his bullies looked. When those of the Bami tribe walked in, especially from the Asakana clan, he had felt the difference in size. No

wonder their tribe was the strongest in the north, and they had held that position for ages. They looked like beasts.

one had almost ran into him and almost stepped on him as he moved and had stopped himself at the last moment. he looked down so far before finding the obstacle that had stood in his way. What he saw was a child and his eyes had narrowed even further. He had then lowered his towering form and lifted him into his hands like a child.

"Hey, kid, how did you get in? Which examiner is your parent?" he had asked.

"I'm thirteen," was all Kero had said, and that had the boy bursting out loud. He almost keeled over. He then called his buddies over. kero braced himself to get a beating, but they had just looked at him as if he were an animal, like a dog. They patted his hair and petted him, pulling his cheeks and limbs as if he were a toy before leaving. For the first time in his life, he did not know how to feel as he watched the tall boys walk towards the trial arena. No one from the Bami tribe had ever failed in joining a war academy, and he wondered if they were the ones he was supposed to compete with. Many kids did not even try to compete with them and some other northern tribes, so they just picked a second-best war school or third to try at joining.

kero, after just watching one of them pick him as if he were an infant, almost turned around to go to the Daziko Sun School trial arena or the Zoli Sea Academy, but even the thought disgusted him. After all the training he had done, he was not going to try for anything less than first place. he took one step towards the Galka War Academy recruiting trial arena. Then another and then another. He could hear whispers around him, but he had gotten so used to them that instead of them acting as a discouragement, they were like fuel under his feet. His bullies, who had cowered out and were almost heading for the other war school arenas, could not believe their eyes. Even so, they were not about to lose to him, and they joined in a walk. They could not bully him inside the exam council headquarters, but he could feel their hate growing, and it fired him even further.

"Willing recruits stand in line!" A command was issued, and he ended up in the first line beside those of the Bami tribe. They kept their eyes forward with no fear, as if it was just another day in their life. He hated them even more. They had been born with a genetic advantage. They had never once endured the struggle of being weak. Even before they trained a day in their life, they were already better than him, and that made his hate for them grow every second until it turned into loathing. He loathed them the most, and he wanted to crush them. He wanted them to know what it tasted like to be weak.

## **Chapter 52: Chapter 52: INTESITY**

"He is awake. It is time to begin." Principal Senraki said in the most serious tone that Sagiri had ever heard come out of him. He looked scary, and his presence held an even darker aura than Captain Salka. It did not look good for him at all. A moment of silence

followed like the silence before a storm, and since Sagiri could not get a read on the three men, he could only wait for what awaited him to unfold.

"Take the recruit to the questioning chamber," Senraki instructed before turning around. He did not pay Sagiri any attention as if he did not exist at all. Salka and Torena stepped aside to allow him to pass before Torena gave instructions for two junior instructors to help him walk. They helped him out of bed and basically supported his entire body weight to keep up with Senraki, Salka, and Torena.

They took Sagiri to the questioning chamber in silence. It almost felt like he was the offender and not the offended.

The interrogation room is a narrow room carved deep beneath the central pentagon. Stone walls. No windows. A single lamp hanging low, its light steady and unforgiving. The air was cold enough to stiffen his skin. He was made to sit on a single seat at the center. Only Torena entered the room, but he could feel the other two watching from behind a veil that stood in front of him. He did not raise his voice when he questioned him.

"Name who attacked you." Torena came to a stop in the middle of the cold room.

Sagiri kept his eyes forward. His jaw ached where it had been set. Every breath pressed against cracked ribs. He said nothing. The silence stretched. He was put in a compromising position. He did not want to give the boys away because he wanted to punish them himself. To Senraki and all others, it seemed he was scared to mention his assailant. It was only normal for those bullied to be scared of mentioning their assailants for fear of future punishment. To Sagiri, however, the case was different. He did not want to give the boys away because he did not want to miss the chance to punish them himself.

An instructor circled him once, boots echoing slowly against stone. Another adjusted the lamp so the light burned directly into Sagiri's eyes.

"Your injuries were not from training," Senraki said. "This was deliberate. Speak recruit. I will not tolerate disobedience." Sagiri swallowed. His throat felt dry, raw. He shook his head once. Small. Controlled.

"It was not anyone," he said. "I fell on my own," he lied again, and the dangerous aura that hung around Senraki expanded to dangerous levels. Even without being able to perceive his feelings, Sagiri could tell the man held more than just punishing intent. Him and Salka were out of sight, yet he could feel their darkness.

It was a lie, and they all knew it.

Physical pain flooded his body from the dangerous aura of the captain and the marshal. Not enough to break a bone. Enough to remind him where he was. His hands tightened

into fists behind his back, nails digging into skin, but he did not cry out. It was like their mere intention was pressing into him, and he was beginning to wonder whether it was the secret art of the senraki tribe or the Bami. He was beginning to understand what N'varu had meant when he told him he was still too weak against strong opponents. Torenna crouched to meet his eye level.

"You are protecting someone," he said. "That choice carries weight here."

Sagiri met his gaze at last. His eyes were steady. Tired, but steady.

"I fell," he said. "That's all." He was not going to lose his chance of being the one to deliver pain to them.

The freezing temperatures in the room were making his wounds start to sting. His breath left him in a sharp sound he couldn't stop. For a moment, his vision dimmed, the edges darkening, the archive stirring faintly inside him. He forced it down. He would not give it anything to feed on. N'varu had told him the details of what had unfolded, and he was not going to allow himself to just lose control and give his secret away. Torenna questioned him again. And again. Names. Times. Locations, but each answer was the same.

"I don't know."

"I fell."

"There was no one."

Hours passed, or minutes blurred in the chamber. It was as if the room was made especially to break offenders. It did not have any particularly harsh qualities, yet it suffocated with each question.

Finally, when he refused to give in, Senraki appeared from behind a wall, looking even more gloomy.

"Take him to the assembly grounds," he said. "If he doesn't answer, everyone will be punished," Senraki said coolly, and the statement got to Sagiri. He did not want to get everyone punished. That could create even more enemies and trouble for him. The man was much colder than he had expected, and just hearing his statement, he knew he was not playing, and he was going to punish the whole school until he got an answer. Of course, a principal of a war school could never be a softie, but witnessing him in principal mode was both scary and amazing.

The same junior instructors from earlier took Sagiri from the questioning chamber straight to the assembly arena. The stone doors opened to a wide, open floor cut into the heart of Galka. The fourth-year cadets were already there. Dozens of them. All kneeling in ordered lines, one knee down, backs straight, hands locked behind their

backs. Heads forward. No movement. No sound. it seemed as if they had been there since he went to the interrogation chamber.

Instructors stood around them in a wide ring, spaced evenly like sentries. Some held batons. Others had their hands folded behind their cloaks. Their presence pressed down on the arena, heavy and watchful. The cadets only lifted their heads when Sagiri was brought forward, some even gasping when they beheld his face and hand tied to a gauze around his neck before they looked back down. They had all been briefed on his state and even offered a chance of redemption if they confessed. The environment was so tense yet calm at the same time. Those who had a clear conscience had nothing to fear.

He was not forced into a kneeling position like the others because of his condition. He was escorted to a low stone bench, ribs wrapped, jaw stiff, left hand pulsing as the pain medication started to wear off. Even sitting was painful. Standing now was worse. His legs trembled as they stopped him at the edge of the kneeling lines before he was pulled into a sitting position. His eyes met with N'varu, who had a pleading expression. whether he was pleading with him to give up his assailant or not to lose control in front of everyone he did not yet know. One thing was, however, crystal clear to him. He hated to see N'varu kneel and suffer for something he did not do. Even the team 25 members who had forfeited a game for him were suffering the same fate, and it made his blood boil.

Torena spoke finally.

"Point."

The word echoed. Sagiri looked out over the kneeling boys. heads. Tight shoulders. The rise and fall of controlled breathing. None of them turned. None of them looked at him. Discipline held them still. The instructors waited. Pain pulsed through his chest with every moment that he spent sitting. His jaw throbbed. His vision swam slightly, but he stayed upright.

"Identify who attacked you," Salka's voice said.

Sagiri's hand lifted halfway, then stopped.

"There is no one," he said. A murmur moved through the instructors, sharp and brief. The cadets remained silent, kneeling, hands still locked behind their backs.

"You are severely injured," Torena's voice pressed. "Someone did this."

Sagiri shook his head once.

"I fell."

The arena went quiet again. Wind moved across the open stone. The sound of fabric shifting. Breathing. At last, Senraki stepped forward.

"Remove him," he started, "punish all the cadets to kneel all day here all day without food and water," he continued without missing a beat, and Sagiri gasped.

"Yes, Marshal!" The cadets answered in chorus with respect, accepting the punishment, and he could not believe the turn of events. This was the possible worst outcome he had ever imagined, and suddenly dangerous calmness fell on him. He stood to his feet and swayed immediately. The junior instructors standing on both sides of him took Sagiri by the arms before his legs could give out. As he was led away, the fourth year did not move. He felt helpless between his urge to punish and saving his friend. The doors to the fifth pentagon got dangerously close, and with every step, he just could not bear it. He might not have been the most emotional person, but his parents had raised him to be kind. He was not going to let the tamelku twins cause any more pain.

"Stop!" he bellowed with so much force that the power inside him merged with his deep need. He pushed himself out of the junior instructor's hands with so much force, freeing himself that he left them stunned. His feet moved before he could forget his pain. He ran back to the assembly as everyone watched, even the cadets who had their heads lowered, bowed, snapped up to watch the boy. No one could deny the command in his voice. He had taken everyone by surprise. The two junior instructors attempted to run after him, but with one signal from Salka, they were forced to stand down.

He stood directly in front of Principal Senraki, stared into his eyes for one long moment, before he fell to one knee, ignoring his pain and pressing a hand on his chest.

"I remember now who attacked me," he said in a strong voice, all the urge to punish coming back to him. "Let everyone go, and I will tell you," he said. He knew he was in no position to bargain, but no matter how much Senraki was putting on a show, he wanted to see the bully. And Sagiri did not wish for anyone innocent to suffer, especially N'varu. He was willing to back down this once, but if he was going to punish everyone anyway, then he was not going to give him an answer, no matter the cost.

"You defied the marshal and the captain and me, what makes you think you can bargain recruit?" Torena snapped, disgusted by his lack of respect.

"I was the one who was attacked. It seems it was a mistake on your end, discipline commander." His voice came out distorted. His urge to punish was taking over again, and N'varu snapped his eyes to him. "I was almost killed because you failed. You should be punished," he said with so much force that the ground under him trembled slightly.

"Keep-sagiri!" N'varu called, ignoring all protocol. "Stop!" he said with so much panic breaking through to the boy. His sixteenth birthday was approaching quickly, and he was more on edge than ever.

"Torena," Senraki called for the discipline commander, Torena, who was seething. He had never been disrespected that far and by a mere recruit. "You should not speak further out of order, recruit!" Senraki said in a level but powerful voice.

"It is the school that failed me, not my classmates," Sagiri insisted before he spat a mouthful of blood. He had upset his broken ribs, which had not yet healed. N'varu moved again to his ignoring all protocol when he saw him spit blood. Senraki watched the display in front of him with hard eyes with hard unyielding eyes for a long moment before they finally softened slightly. The sharpness in them never wavered for a second however.

"And what if you fail to remember again?" he asked, looking at the boy who was now leaning on the other.

"I won't. But I wish to only speak to you," Sagiri said, holding Senraki's eyes. A long moment of silence followed before Senraki finally breathed in.

"Fine," he started. "Cadets, back to class. On your hands as punishment for failing to protect your comrade," he announced.

"Yes, marshal!" they answered in unison before they stood to their feet, offering a salute to all the instructors and Senraki in their respectful stances.

"Cadets taking punishment for failing to protect a comrade!" they announced again before they fell to their handstands in unison and started leaving the arena.

"Neni, you too," Senraki said, looking directly at N'varu. N'varu hesitated to leave Sagiri's side. "I shall overlook your disregard for protocol and speaking out of turn this time, now move, cadet!" he instructed again when the boy did not move. Sagiri could feel the hesitation from his friend, so he nudged him and gave him a nod, assuring him that he was going to be alright. He hesitated for another long moment before he left his side and stood to his feet with resolve.

"Yes, Marshal! Thank you, Marshal!" he saluted before getting into a handstand to join the others.

"Now what am I going to do with you?" Principal Senraki turned to face him when the assembly ground had cleared up.

### **Chapter 53: Chapter 53: HEALING POOL**

"Take him to the healing pool," Captain Salka said. "The cold one," he continued before leaving.

"The c-cold pool?" one of the junior instructors asked in shock.

"He will heal and receive punishment," Salka said in a curt tone. Sagiri had never once been punished by Salka. But now, however, as the instructors held up his sagging body, his body burning with pain, he realized that he was much worse than Fuwuka in punishment and principal senraki was more than the immature character he portrayed most of the time.

They took him below. it seemed under the central pentagon were many places for different purposes. It was a whole city down below.

Stone steps spiraled down into the lower levels of the central pentagon, where light thinned, and the air grew sharp. The freezing healing pool lay sealed behind a thick iron gate, carved into the bedrock itself.

"The pool is both natural and artificial. it was formally used to punish people, but its water was found to be beneficial for healing when an offender facing torture kept healing. so some healing medicines are frequently added to enable healing. It is, however, too cold, and most patients prefer the warm pool on the level above.

The pool was long and narrow, cut from black stone. The water inside was unnaturally clear and painfully still, a pale blue that reflected no warmth. Mist clung low over its surface, rolling slowly like breath in winter. The cold reached him before he touched the water, biting into his skin, crawling up his bones.

"The warm healing pool above is different. It's wider. Its waters ease muscles, gently close wounds, and allow the body to rest while it recovers. Students prefer it. It's so warm and comfortable you can sleep in it," the other instructor added.

"It is fine. I disobeyed the marshal and the captain, disrespected the discipline division commander, and made the whole fourth year cadets suffer," he said in a level voice, but inside of him, he knew whose fault it was, and the punishment was fueling his urge to punish them more.

This pool demanded movement. you can not stay still in a cold pool unless you want to die.

The two instructors lowered Sagiri in. The moment the water reached his waist, his legs seized. He could not remain standing, and so he sat on a raised platform in the water. When the water reached his chest, his breath broke apart. When they submerged him to the neck, the cold struck deep, like the water wanted to steal heat from inside his very bones. His injuries screamed at once, ribs tightening, jaw locking, his left hand burning as if the break had been reopened.

The water did not soothe him at all, and it almost felt like the water was opening the wounds anew. If he stayed still, the cold would settle into him and slow his heart. If he sank, it would claim him. The only way to survive was to move. Yet he was in too much pain to move. It had been a really bad idea to lie to both a captain and a marshal. Not

many students got to go that far, and he had done it in less than a month. He had no choice but to move, however. The junior instructors had cleared out, however, leaving him to his torture. He settled for standing the sitting.

Slowly.

Every motion sent knives through his body. Muscles stiffened, then burned, then went numb, forcing him to fight for control again. His breath came shallow and sharp, fog spilling from his mouth with every exhale. Time stretched. Seconds felt like minutes. Minutes like hours. He could not tell if he was healing or his body was tearing open.

The cold constricted blood vessels, sealed swelling, and stopped internal bleeding. But it did so cruelly, stripping comfort away, demanding pain as payment. His body shook violently, not from weakness alone, but from the effort of staying alive. Sagiri clenched his teeth and kept moving. It was futile, and he wanted to give in and just see what could happen then.

The cold kept gnawing at him relentlessly. Sagiri's limbs were slowing. Each movement took more thought than the last. His breath stuttered, fog spilling from his mouth in weak bursts. The pool pressed in from all sides, heavy and patient, waiting for the moment he would stop fighting.

He was pushed to his limits so much that he was at the end of his wits. Just when he was about to let himself go and see the worst that could happen, an idea popped into his head. 'meditative conscious slumber.' For some reason, right now, he could remember N'varu's instructions. He sank into the sitting platform and folded himself into a meditative posture.

The shock of stillness nearly dragged him under. Panic flared from deep within his brain, urging him not to give in, but he forced it down. He fixed his gaze on nothing, on the space between breaths, and let his thoughts sink inward without letting go.

Awake,

Aware, he chanted like a mantra.

He slowed his breathing until it barely disturbed the water. Each inhale was shallow, controlled. Each exhale deliberately. The pain did not stop immediately. In fact it got worse but meditative slumber was not easy to achieve and now with the pressing factors around him it was even harder. His wounds burned, his bones ached painfully, and the water froze him to his very melancholic cells. He clenched his jaw and focused. When he finally brushed the surface of the conscious slumber, something finally happened. The pain stopped spreading and narrowed down to only the afflicted places. The cold no longer screamed. It was still there, but it was slightly manageable.

Then the sensation turned inward.

As he fell deeper into the conscious slumber, his awareness of everything inside of him and around him grew. He could feel the dripping of water drops and even the frozen air in the cave. He was not only aware of his surroundings but also everything that was happening inside of him. He was suddenly aware as he felt his muscles, not as agony but as structure. Fibers tightening. Tremors settling into rhythm.

he allowed himself to fall even deeper, and his body finally responded with something other than pain. The power inside of him stirred as if finally waking up. The feeling that he was stuck in that dark place when he had fallen unconscious pressed onto him again. Only this time, he was awake to feel it all. the crippling pain and searing fire as the power inside of him concentrated itself on his injuries and broken bones. So this is how I had healed? His ribs slowly but progressively stopped stabbing with every breath. They drew inward, knitting themselves tight. His jaw eased, bone shifting, locking back into place with a dull, grinding heat that spread beneath the cold. His left hand burned, then steadied, bones aligning as if guided by invisible hands. He felt the whole process and experienced it, and he did not collapse or lose consciousness this time. He felt his wounds visibly close up, and he was glad his uniform covered his body entirely, and his mask and hood only left his eyes exposed. The pool might have accelerated healing, but it was not a miracle pool.

Healing.

Slow. Violent. Precise.

he stayed in the conscious slumber even long after he had completely healed. But then, like a punch in the gut, a wrenching feeling tore through his body, pushing him out of his meditative consciousness slumber.

He staggered to the edge of the pool, fingers digging into the stone, and his breath broke. A violent retch tore through him. Thick, sticky fluid poured from his mouth, dark and glossy, clinging to the floor instead of splashing. The stench followed a heartbeat later, and it was nauseatingly sharp, metallic, wrong, like rot mixed with burned oil.

He gagged again, not catching a break. More came up, stringing between his lips before snapping free. It steamed faintly in the cold air, refusing to spread, pooling in heavy knots instead. His stomach clenched until there was nothing left to give. he heaved again and again till there was nothing left. Sagiri wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, breathing hard. He did not have any strength left, and he fell forward, laying his head at the edge of the pool.

He now understood what his body did. It could heal itself, and he finally understood part of the reason N'varu had taught him how to fall into conscious slumber. It was much more powerful than meditative slumber. Conscious slumber could help him regain his energy, heal him, and even help him enlarge his capabilities. He had Captain Salka to thank for his discovery. The man had pushed him to master it quickly.

The pool stood silent behind him. Something new he hadn't noticed before had also happened. The pool was now hot behind him, almost hot. While he was in his conscious slumber, while the power inside him had stirred, it had also heated the pool. He only hoped that the marks under his combat hadn't been glowing loudly. In his conscious slumber, however, he had not felt any presence around him, but remembering how N'varu hid his presence, he was not as confident anymore. He could only hope.

Sagiri straightened slowly, legs steady now, chest whole, jaw firm. The smell lingered, thick and unpleasant, but his body felt clear. Something else had happened to his body. He had also lost weight, and he was skinnier than he was yesterday.

He needed to clean his vomit, but he had to serve his punishment first. He sank back to the sitting platform, and this time, he allowed himself to fall into meditative slumber. He had only been sleeping due to the influence of medicine, and he needed to get proper sleep before he could join the other and find a way to tell the truth to Senraki and still punish the twins himself. He had learned his lesson to never tell a lie to the guy, but he was not going to let it go before he punished them for all the pain they caused him and everyone.

#### **Chapter 54: Chapter 54: ME**

"If I could not hear your breath all the way here, I could have thought you were dead, and that is the sound of you decomposing," a voice said, jolting Sagiri out of his meditative slumber.

"Don't come any closer," Sagiri said, his back turned. His voice sounded shrill in the underground stone walls.

"Did I ever tell you sometimes you sound like a general? As odd as if your orders must be followed," Lotaga said, approaching anyway. "What is that smell of rotting? Are you dying, boy?" he said, sniffing the air like a hound.

"That is why I asked you not to approach. I need water to clean my vomit." Sagiri said in an almost displeased tone. After healing his wounds, he rather loved being in a secluded, cool place. It was maybe him or the power stirring inside of him. It loved seclusion. N'varu might have been right about something happening when he turned sixteen. As the days trickled by to his birthday, he kept growing more on edge.

"Don't worry about it. The prisoners will clean it." Lotaga said, acting as if it was not smelling like death itself inside the cafe.

"Prisoners?" Sagiri asked, finally standing from the pool and turning around. The water had remained warm even long after he came out of his conscious slumber, and it was just starting to freeze again. The water stirred and splattered on the sides.

"Yes, of course. Where do you think we take those who try to sneak into the Galka War Academy and try to undermine Tagayia by nipping its youngsters in the bud?" Lotaga started. "It is not like it is a secret. Sometimes, some northern tribes try to show that they are better in war than the youngins in here who are the future warriors, and so they try to break in to prove they are better." Lotaga continued, and Sagiri remembered Salka's words when they had first arrived at Galka War Academy. The evil glint appeared when he asked whether there had ever been intruders.

"Does Captain Salka capture them?" Sagiri asked, and Lotaga smiled even wider.

"It is not only the captain, but the principal senraki loves it too," Lotaga whispered the last part as if speaking louder could suddenly summon Senraki. "All the wardens and warriors within Galka War Academy love it. we call it a party," Lotaga said, eyes twinkling with excitement, and Sagiri almost felt bad for whoever saw it fit to break into Senraki, Salka, and their hounds' turf. It seemed that they craved a fight, and when an intruder broke in, it was a well-awaited appearance. That was a scary thought. like breaking into someone's house and finding out they eat humans for breakfast.

"Do you kill them?" Sagiri asked, and he could not for himself tell where the question had come from.

"It depends on Salka's mood," Lotaga said in a serious tone, and Sagiri caught it. "It seems this time you managed to anger the captain. He doesn't easily punish," Lotaga finished as if waiting for Sagiri to explain himself, but Sagiri was starting to think it had been a bad idea to like Captain Salka. The guy had not done anything to harm him so far, and he had kept his secret.

"I was the weak one. It is no one's fault that I failed to defend myself," Sagiri answered coolly, and Lotaga cheered.

"I already told you. Sometimes you speak as if you are old and have lived many lives. You should not let Senraki hear you say that, however." Lotaga continued, and Sagiri could not debate him on the first part. Sometimes, he surprised himself. He knew things that were beyond his age and had seen into the past that no one alive had seen. The second part however he was not willing to find out so he nodded obediently

"Why have you come?" Sagiri asked, feeling oddly calm and in control. Every time he could vomit, he felt light, like he had been renewed. Between the cold pool and the conscious slumber his mind was clear, and he knew what had to be done.

"You are no fun," Lotaga pouted. "Your punishment has been lifted. Go clean up, change, and go to Zazami's office," he said in a bored tone.

"Will you still teach me at night?" Sagiri asked before he lifted himself out of the temple. Now that he had stopped the meditative slumber that slowed his heart to keep him from freezing, he actually felt how cold it was.

"I'm glad you think of me as a good trainer. I will, of course, keep training you since you begged me." Lotaga said, almost too excited. Sagiri had never been able to understand Lotaga. He was a curious character who did not listen to orders, yet he was still stuck to Captain Salka's hip, which could only mean he was dependable. Captain Salka did not seem like someone who kept incompetent people around him.

"I will see you in the combat arena tonight," Sagiri said, saluting the senior instructor before heading for the freezing pool cafe opening.

"I don't think that is possible for tonight. It is almost midnight. the pool must have done a number on you if you don't remember the time," Lotaga snickered. Of course, Sagiri did not know what time it was. It was completely dark under the central pentagon healing pool cafe, except for the thin light coming from the artificial flaming wall on the walls.

It was a long way to get outside, and he heard Lotaga follow him silently from a distance. The journey to the dormitory wing was long, and with every step, Sagiri felt like falling asleep. His eyes kept getting heavier and heavier as he walked. His steps were almost blurry by the time he got to his room 246. His dirty clothes were cleaned and neatly laid out on his bed. N'varu was really dependable, and he was starting to feel indebted. He felt like he had to be the actual keeper N'varu sought, and he had to live up to the boy's expectation.

The showers in Galka War Academy were always cold, but not freezing. He opened the central plains' best water-holding innovation to release water into the bathing trough. He almost nodded off as he took off his clothes. His body was tired, and he was starting to think the pool had been the only thing that had kept him awake after his body healed itself. The tiredness he felt could not be fought by mere showers. He peeled the last piece of fabric and forced himself to scrub his body. He was awake just by his sheer will and nothing more. He bathed quickly than usual but made sure to peel off the wrappings on his body and scrape the dried blood from the places where his skin had been opened by the attack.

He had realized the power inside of him reacted to blood strongly, and so he paid attention to those and made sure he was completely clean. He left his dirty clothes on the floor. It was an offense that was punishable by Torena, but he was too tired to care. He then applied the muscle soothing cream that N'varu had laid on top of his uniform. His eyes were almost completely shut when he started wearing his uniform. He was almost thankful that the uniform was an overall with double layers where it mattered, and so he only had to pay attention to his mask and gloves before he pulled the combat suit on. His will must have waited for him to completely dress up because it expired immediately after the last layer of fabric was in place and the zipper was pulled to just below his chin.

Sagiri was swallowed into slumber without warning. He barely registered his head hitting the pillows, and he was out. Not out in a sleep kind of way, but as if he had been

called to the other side and switched off from the current world. He completely did not have a choice, and he knew it. Either he went willingly, or he was swallowed forcefully.

he did not fall into peaceful slumber, however, because the moment he departed from reality, he was thrown into another. One moment he was standing. Next, he is falling inward. There is no ground when he opens his eyes.

He floated in a vast, colorless space, neither dark nor light, like fog stretched into infinity. There is no sky. No floor. Only depth. His body felt weightless, yet restrained, as if held by invisible threads. The floating only lasted a moment before he felt it. a presence. a presence even stronger than he had ever felt before, and he turned quickly to see its source. Someone stood across from him, a him that was even more real than him. He held a presence that Sagiri had not realized he lacked before.

They are the same height. They have the same face. and even the same markings, but the eyes are wrong, they are not of different colours like his. One is not amber nor the other red. They are just dark like an abyss with no end, and yet they were too still, too deep, like something looking in rather than out. The other Sagiri does not breathe. Does not blink. He simply exists.

They circle each other without moving. The space around them tightened with something like hostility. Then just as they were about to burst from the motions, images suddenly rippled through the void, flashes of pain, freezing water, bones knitting, breath breaking. None linger. They pass between them like echoes bouncing off unseen walls.

Sagiri tried to speak but no sound came out. the other him was not him yet he was even more than he was. It was like he was a copy of himself yet he knew he was fully himself. It was a confusing dream. He had not dreamt in a while or intensively since he joined the galka war academy yet his first intense dream was confusing him.

The other him lifted a hand finally. Not in greeting or threat but in recognition.

The moment their gazes lock, pressure slammed into Sagiri from all sides. His chest tightened. His limbs strained against the pressure but he held on. He felt himself being measured, weighed, peeled open layer by layer. It was as if the other him held all the secrets he wanted to know about himself, and he was tired of carrying them by himself. How weird.

The other Sagiri steps closer. The distance between them collapsed quickly. Right when he was close enough, however, he started fading quickly, and Sagiri remained frozen in his invisible restraints and could not follow him. It was as if the other him, who was more than him, was trying to show him the way to follow, yet he could not move. He tried to force himself, but the space between them became wider, and pressure pressed harder into him as if it wanted to crush him. He couldn't take it anymore, yet he did not want to let the new him go.

For a heartbeat, Sagiri feels everything at once. Then the other him turns away and the space fractured completely. Sagiri fell again, and this time into himself. He woke up gasping, body soaked in sweat, heart hammering, hands clenched into the bedding.

The room was real again, but the feeling was not gone. Something inside him was waking up. Something inside of him was tired of being repressed, and it scared him. For the first time in his life, he felt genuine fear. Not the fear he perceived from others, but his own fear. The fear of the other him he had met. Why could the other him feel fear? What was there to fear? The tamelku twins? He asked himself but somewhere deep down he knew it was not about the twins and that made him uncomfortable. He hated mysteries and preferred knowing everything.

### **Chapter 55: Chapter 55: A GOAL**

It was already past midnight, and the dorm was dead silent. He had slept for more than four hours and had completely forgotten to obey a direct command. No one had come to wake me up anyway, and perhaps had forgotten about me. He thought, but with Salka and Senraki's nature, he knew that was not possible. He was disturbed after the dream he had just had, yet he had never felt so alive. His clothes were still laid out in the bathroom, and he settled for washing them first. He cleaned his room, and yet it was still not time to wake up. He spread his bed neatly in the Galka War School's required way. He did not want to go back to sleep, and so he stepped out of his dorm room. He knew he was not supposed to be out during sleeping hours, but he did not want to be in his dorm room anymore.

He was feeling more on edge, bolder, and more himself after meeting himself. He could not explain to anyone that, till today, he had been living like a shell of himself, as if the real him was a prisoner inside of him. He had tasted a piece of himself in his dream. It wasn't sweet, but he wanted to be wholly himself without whatever barrier had been put inside of him.

The corridors were empty as he walked out of the dormitory wing. He should have been scared of being attacked again, but for some reason, he wasn't. His feet echoed softly against the hard floors as he walked aimlessly, circling the pentagon and going down a level. It was quiet with only the glow from the artificial lamps lighting the whole place. His feet did not waver until he entered the combat arena. It was empty and silent, with all the hand wrappings and all the dummy dummies standing in place.

Something inside of him was heavy, as if he were a prisoner yet, and he had just tasted freedom for the first time. He also had the urge to get stronger now more than ever. He could feel something inside him shift physically as his sixteenth birthday approached, and it both scared him and lit a fire under his feet. His body had fully healed, but it had grown even thinner. His combat suit felt loose against his body.

Sagiri's footsteps echoed in the empty arena as he walked deeper until he was standing at the centre. He let the silence around him sink into his bones. He felt like dancing, and

now more than ever, the only thing he could think of and memorize was the hand combat dance he had learned with everyone else and practiced with Lotaga in the nights when most students were in the tribe's secret art arenas. He did not know his tribe, and no one else knew his tribe, so attending a secret art class was just impossible.

He calmed his mind completely before he sank into the starting stance. He imitated the starting time by counting the thumbs of his heart.

"Hand combat dance!" he announced loudly. After three and a half thumbs of his heart, he jumped into action. Every time he moved, he could only see the one whom he had met and savored in their oneness. It was a sorrowful dance to watch, but for the first time, he actually felt connected to the dance. He poured his confusion into the dance as he jumped, blocked, punched, fell, kicked, rolled, before standing up again. The dance was neither too long nor too short, and for the first time since it was taught to him, he managed to finish it without making a mistake.

by the time he finished it, he was panting. Another emotion was already building inside him as well, not allowing him to savor his small achievement. The urge to punish the Tamelku twins. He pictured them in his mind standing as obstacles before him. He closed his eyes and internalized the dance and even the obstacle position. Two bodies. Two threats. Constant pressure.

"Hand combat dance!" He announced before he moved. His moves were more precise this time and filled with intent. Practicing with an enemy in mind made it easier to train. Training without a target in mind was like training without a goal, and perhaps he had been training all along without a real goal. a real enemy. it excited some part of him and called for punishment from some part of him. All in all, if they were going to drive his goal, then it was a benefit.

A strike snapped out elbow, palm, knee, flowing without pause, aimed at the torso. He twisted past an imagined grab, shoulder rolling under an unseen arm, heel cutting low where a knee would be. His body dipped, rose, spun. He struck empty air as if it could strike back. The twins attacked together in his head. calling for the next block and counterattack of the hand combat dance.

Sagiri did not retreat. He was in control and free in the hand combat dance. He drove forward, slipping between them, turning one threat into a shield against the other. His hands snapped to throats, wrists, joints, control, break, release. No wasted motion. No hesitation. His breathing stayed tight and rhythmic, syncing with each strike. Sweat ran down his spine. Pain flared in his ribs, but he ignored it. He might have healed completely, but his ribs still remembered the taste of pain. He used the memory of the pain as a trigger as he moved to the next part of the hand combat dance, the peak of the dance.

The dance accelerated. Footwork blurred. His body remembered the dark corridor as he ran to the dining wing, he remembered being hunted and hurt without being able to hunt back. Every pivot was survival, and every strike was refusal. When he finished, he froze in a low stance, fists clenched, chest heaving. The arena was still and quiet before him, filled with only the sound of his panting. The twins had vanished with his last attack. Only Sagiri remained alone in the silence, heart pounding, body burning, mind sharp.

"You have finally started to understand the art of war," a voice broke through the whole arena, followed by a slow clap. Sagiri had not heard or perceived Captain Salka approaching yet again. He wheeled around immediately to look for the owner of the voice, who was standing with hands folded to his chest, his instructor's black coat flowing behind him.

"Captain Salka!" He saluted him.

"It is either you are good at ignoring your pain or the pool was a miracle." Salka pushed from his position on the wall.

"I apologize for the trouble," he said, giving another salute to Salka. After the intensity of his punishment, he was beginning to understand that the captain might have been the most dangerous man inside the walls of Galka War Academy or the second most dangerous. Either way, he had always wanted the captain on his side when mud hit the roof, and disobeying was not the way.

"Yet you are here at odd hours when you are supposed to be sleeping. Do you enjoy being punished? you also kept the grand marshal waiting while you slept in your room," Salka said, shaking his head. Sagiri had not recovered from one punishment, and he had already committed two more offenses. "If I hadn't asked the instructors to just let you be just now, who knows how many punishments you would be serving?" Salka continued, and Sagiri's head popped up.

"You followed me from the dormitory wing?" Sagiri was actually surprised that someone followed him without him noticing.

"I did." Lotaga popped out behind Salka, and Sagiri was even more confused.

"You are lucky my tracker here is obsessed with you. He stayed outside your room after you fell asleep and followed you here," Salka continued, pinching his brows.

"I was scared he would be harmed if I left him helpless," Lotaga defended himself.

"You know there are dormitory wing wardens watching all day and night," Salka said, already done arguing with Lotaga.

"Well, I did not want to take any chances. Besides, you said you would put me on pet-tending duties if I didn't escort him to Zazami's office." Lotaga defended himself, trying

to act all innocent. his combat at suit zipper was open to his navel, and his coat was tied to his waist, dragging behind him.

"Was it necessary also to use my name?" Salka asked, turning to face Lotaga.

"Well, I thought this was what you could have wanted." Lotaga jumped back, acting innocent as if he was acting in Captain Salka's interest. The man had only dressed neatly when they picked him from the examination council headquarters.

"You are pet-tending duties," Salka said, and the two continued bickering as Sagiri watched, wondering if they were six or twenty-six.

"Please, captain, I will be a good senior captain," Lotaga begged, clinging to Salka's legs without any dignity. That is what he had said when they were in the training chamber. Sometimes Lotaga acted like a spoiled child in front of Salka, and sometimes they acted like friends, but both times Lotaga got on Captain Salka's nerves equally.

"Fine, now let go of my leg, you are no longer a child," Captain Salka finally snapped, trying to peel Lotaga from his leg. However, he didn't have two because the moment the pet-tending punishment was lifted, Lotaga jumped back to his feet, quickly sliding his finger between the lines that held his hair on top of his head.

"My body was too tired then from the cold, and I just slept. I wanted to get better at the hand combat dance, not to let the others down at the friendly competitions." His answer was partly true and partly a lie, but his honest answer could have put him in trouble if he said it out loud.

"You should head back to the dormitory wing and try to get some sleep before meditative hour. I don't think even using me as a shield will save you from Torena's punishment," Salka said, dismissing Sagiri. He was right about Torena. After the way he talked to Torena during his outburst, he could be lucky if the man did not break him in half if he got on his bad side again.

"Come to Senraki's office during lunch hour. Don't fall asleep again. His patience may run out again," Salka said over his shoulder, and Sagiri couldn't agree more. He needed to settle matters with Principal Senraki as soon as possible and make sure to satisfy both Senraki and his urge to punish.

## **Chapter 56: Chapter 56: THE VERDICT**

The time counting innovation hummed on the wall lowly. Only the sound of rustling paper and scribbling pen could be heard. Sagiri was standing in the middle of the room, staring at the man seated in front of him as he went through the mountain of paperwork before him as if he did not exist. He dared not speak, however. He had kept him waiting, and now it was his turn.

"Sagiri, my aged student." Senraki finally jumped out of his chair, a creepy grin on his face. "What am I to do with you?" Before he could answer, however, the door opened, and Captain Salka, Captain Fuwuka, and Discipline Division commander Torena walked in.

"Boy, you'd better tell the truth this time, I was almost getting somewhere with a prisoner." Salka was the first to speak, sitting on one of the chairs in front of Senraki's office. He had a dull coloured cloth in his hand. Sagiri's nose immediately smelled the blood even now more clearly than he did before.

"Blood," he sniffed the air before he turned to face the captain.

"Don't worry, recruit, it is not mine," Captain Salka said, throwing the cloth in a dirt pot across the corner, where it disappeared perfectly into the pot.

"Salsal, you didn't tell me the boy has a keen nose." Senraki's eyes twinkled, turning to Captain Salka with an accusatory tone.

"Well, I can't call it a keen sense of smell exactly, the boy gets sick when he smells blood." Captain Salka said, throwing one leg in front of the other. Lotaga had told Sagiri that under the central pentagon, there was a prison for criminals who had tried to break into Galka War Academy. Now smelling the blood coming from the captain, he could not begin to imagine what had happened.

"Let's begin." Captain Fuwuka said in an impatient tone, he and Torena did not have time for chitchat. The four men sat in different angles on different chairs in the room, but all their eyes were set on

"Senraki sat at the edge of his desk, his earlier jolly mood disappearing. It seemed the man really hated bullying.

"Who was it? or who were they?" Senraki asked.

"I did not see them, but I know who they were." Sagiri started, and all the men in the room shifted uncomfortably.

"If you did not see them, how could you know who it was?" Fuwuka asked in a tight tone, almost as if he could not believe a word Sagiri was saying, and it was a waste of his time.

"Yes, how could you know it was them?" Torena echoed Fuwuka's words. The two seemed to be cut from the same cloth with just slightly different fronts.

"I just know, I don't need my sight to tell people apart," Sagiri snapped, slightly irritable. Ever since he had met the other him, and with his sixteenth birthday approaching in a

few days, he was more on edge than usual. He had always been calm, and nothing bothered him, but he was not feeling like himself lately.

"That is true," I can vouch for the boy, and so can Lotaga. "When we were escorting him north, the boy could tell the exact number of enemies who were approaching us in the dark. I guess the cadets who attacked him did not know he could tell them apart without his sight, and that is why they attacked him in the dark ramp," Salka continued.

"So you are telling me the boy is as good as a hound?" Torenna snickered, still not believing him at all.

"Apart from some hunting plans of the west who have a keen sense of smell, I did not know easterners had such tribes," Fuwuka said, watching Sagiri warily.

"The boy is not from the east," Senraki finally said. He had been oddly silent the whole time.

"What is your clan and tribe recruit?" Fuwuka asked.

I was adopted by my parents. I do not have a clan or a tribe." Sagiri Said, and there was a sharp intake from the three out of the four men in the room.

"Well, files are confidential, especially when they are that unique.' Senraki defended himself when the three looked at him with accusatory looks, especially Salka.

"Don't look at me like that, Salsal. You did not tell me the boy saved your entire team, either." Senraki defended himself, scooting slightly away from Captain Salka, who had his chair closest to him.

"Where did you learn the art of the hunt hound?" Fuwuka asked again.

"I learned it myself. It was not hard. I hunted by myself all the time," Sagiri answered honestly. He had realized he could tell creatures apart by the sound of their heartbeat a long time ago. He was only able to know it was the Tamelku twins who attacked him because of the smell of hate that hung around them."

"Still, at your young age, you should not have been able to master it to such lengths." Fuwuka refused to believe what he was hearing. He seemed like a man who had to see to believe.

"The boy is a genius, fuwuka, or do you think he could qualify for aged students slots because he is normal?" Salka said, totally unbothered. He had seen the boy in action, and after what Lotaga had told him, he knew the boy was a genius in studies and sensory perception. "He even outsmarted the tamelku in the shadow and pillar arena during a sensory exercise. he did not need his eyes then." Salka said. Sagiri knew that his abilities could be known one day, but this was much sooner than expected. He had

wanted his secret to stay safe with just Salka and his genius with senraki, but it seemed he needed all the support he could get to prove he was not lying.

"Still, he is just a boy," Torena disagreed, too.

"Let's ask the boy how he knows who assaulted him," Senraki said again.

"Well, answer the question, recruit." Fuwuka insisted.

"I have trained with them before in the obstacle arena under Captain Salka and Senior Instructor Lotaga. He can tell you that himself," Sagiri said, turning to look at the door. No one in the room seemed surprised that Lotaga had been eavesdropping. However, they were surprised that Sagiri could tell Lotaga was outside the door. Lotaga always kept his presence concealed, but Sagiri could perceive curiosity coming from the door that he was only familiar with Lotaga. he was like a child when it came to curiosity.

"I see," Fuwuka said after a long moment of silence.

"Come in." Captain Salka said, but only the sound of feet scrambling could be heard as Lotaga ran away. It seemed it was a regular occurrence, and no one minded until Sagiri mentioned his presence. His acts were ignorable to them, but acting without dignity and being found out by a recruit was a blow to the ranks. "He is going on pet tending duty," Salka seethed under his breath before turning to Sagiri.

"So it was the tamelku twins? I doubt only one of them could do this much damage," Captain Salka said.

"It seems they held a grudge after you put me in a game of hunting with one of them. They already disliked me after the sensory exam. it seems they did not take kindly to being taunted." Sagiri continued, still standing in a respectful stance, but with both hands behind his back.

"I guessed as much," Salka said, not even surprised.

"So why were you protecting them?" Senraki asked, his aura going dark.

"I wasn't. I did not want to get more hate from the cadets if the Tamelku twins got in trouble. I have no intention of forgiving them," he said the last part with more venom than anyone had expected, and Senraki lifted a brow, the dark aura growing even bigger, but with a wink of excitement. He had let his feelings leak through before he kept them in check again.

"I don't want them punished," Sagiri continued, and Torena was the first to answer.

"You have no say in that. I am the discipline commander, and I will decide that," he said in a curt tone, and Sagiri was sure the man was willing to follow it to the end.

'I don't want them just punished, I want them to die,' was what Sagiri had wanted to say before Torena cut him off.

"I agree with Torena, the cadets have to be punished according to the rules of the Galka War Academy." Fuwuka chimed in.

"No," Sagiri said again, and all four men were uniformly dismissed.

"I don't want them to be expelled or merely punished. I want to compete with them in an exam and beat them. I want to beat them in sensory perception. If they merely get punished or expelled, I will then be avoided by others and never find a rival to conquer." Sagiri snapped the urge to punish, taking over him, filling the air around him with chills. His words were no measure for what he really wanted to do to them.

"That is not your place, recruit," Torena started, not agreeing with Sagiri's words that lacked both discipline and decorum.

"I was the one who they almost killed, I think it is my place," he said, his voice deadly as if he was not himself anymore. any punishment by the school to them was nowhere near what he had planned for them. They had hurt him without cause, and they had awakened something inside him which demanded justice.

"I forgot to tell you that we don't easily expel recruits. After all the resources invested in them and expulsion would be the least possible situation. This is a war school, and punishment for bad conduct does not end here," Salka continued. if this is put in their conduct books, they will not join a college, and they will never join a college. "The punishment for almost killing a comrade, however, is punishable by death or losing a limb or a finger on each hand to show their character wherever they went in the future and wherever they will serve," Salka continued, and Sagiri gasped. If he had known the punishment was that beautiful, he could have let them suffer sooner.

"Oh," is all he could manage. If he had known how severely Galka war school punished bullying, then he would not have had to suffer.

"Then I want them to lose a finger right after the friendlies. I do not want to ruin the morale of the others," Sagiri said coolly.

"You may be young, but you are colder than Senraki here," Captain Salka said, looking at Senraki, who hid a scheming smile right in time so as not to get caught.

"It is still not your place to decide their punishment, recruit, and if you speak out of turn again, I will not let you sleep for a week," Torena said at the end of his patience with how Sagiri was talking to him.

"Well, them. They will be punished after the friendly. I will personally see to their punishment." Senraki's chilling voice filled the room again. The dark aura that

surrounded him ever since he came into the healing room was much bigger, almost swallowing the whole room. Sagiri could help but wonder why the man who was always jovial and childish had such a dark side to him.

no one in the room spoke again after Senraki gave his final verdict. It was as if no one dared to defy him in that mood except Captain Salka, who was yawning.

"Well then, I'd better get back to my work." Salka jumped to his feet. He was the first to leave the room, and Sagiri saluted him. Torena and Fuwuka followed, and he saluted them too. There was prolonged silence after they were left in the room, Senraki. When he finally spoke, Sagiri actually experienced another feeling he had never experienced before. Senraki did not hide his feelings this time.

"If they attack you again before the end of the friendly competitions, I will be the only law." His voice was cold, and his feelings were cold. He did not have any. "recruit dismissed," he said, still sitting in the same spot.

"Yes, Marshal?!" Sagiri saluted him before walking out of the office. What he had perceived from Senraki was similar to his recent urge to punish. only that his was much colder and darker.

## **Chapter 57: Chapter 57: THE PLAN**

"Recruits and cadets of Galka War Academy, as your principal, I'm very happy to announce that the cadets of Konate Wild Academy will be here today for the friendly competitions for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. After the assembly is dismissed, I want the fourth-year cadets to remain behind." Senraki's voice echoed through the arena. It had been a week after Sagiri's attack, and school life had pretty much returned to normal. He had not made contact with the Tamelku twins again, but whenever they crossed paths, they always gave him looks between hate and tension.

The Konate Wild Academy was so far south of the west that Sagiri wondered how many days the boys had to travel. Just like Galka concentrated more on the art of war, the Konate wild school concentrated on studying the raw art of the hunt in war-making, just as deadly. They ranked fourth overall and second in the west, right after Kafka Rift Academy. Kafka is an all-girls school that concentrates mostly on the art of the hunt. killing in the hunt more like, and they were as fierce as they came. Their choice of animal was also worrying, and it was the only thing on the school logo.

"Cadets dismissed!" he bellowed, and all the cadets below the fourth year saluted before leaving the assembly ground. Silence prevailed as they left in an orderly manner until Pindrop silence was restored. After another heartbeat of silence, Senraki finally spoke. This time, he was not smiling. His eyes were cold when he looked at the students in front of him.

"I should say it is a happy event that Konate Academy is coming, so you can polish your skills, but it is not. If not that the boys and girls of Konate had already set out when this incident occurred, I could have cancelled it. Our recruit and aged student was attacked and almost killed inside the walls of my academy. I ask myself if, after all these three years, I have failed to discipline you?"

"You haven't failed, Marshal!" The cadets saluted, getting on one knee. Right knee to the earth, the right hand to the heart, and the left to their backs in a sign of great regret and apology. "We cadets failed the marshal!" Even Sagiri joined in the chorus, but with every word, his urge to punish them became even more unbearable, and he wanted to cut a limb of each of the twins by himself. Since I don't want to ruin this friendly competition for everyone, I allowed recruit Sagiri to tell the names of the two who attacked him after they are over. I will then punish them in accordance with the rules of Salka War Academy. They shall be stripped of honour now and in the future by losing a limb." Senraki finished with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, taking over his face.

Sagiri had already told him the identity of the culprits, so he could not understand why the Senraki could tell such a lie. The only reasoning behind it could only be that the man had another plan up his sleeve, and Sagiri was just glad he was not on the end of the stick for his mind games. There were uncomfortable breaths from everyone, and Sagiri could perceive the thick feelings of discomfort in the air. After all, a dishonored warrior was the same as a dead warrior. The means of punishment were intense, but it was necessary. Sagiri had a feeling that Senraki was the one who had put such an extreme rule in place. He just couldn't prove it.

"Moving on to the good news," Senraki continued, "There will be no classes today, and you all can use this time to polish your studies and areas where you are weak until midday, when we will meet here again to welcome your comrades from Konate Wild Academy."

"Now you are all dismissed except for Sagiri, N'varu, Kaka, Kiuga, Ulekai, Bukata, Zolinka, Zazarie, and all members in temporary team 25 remain behind. Everyone dispersed except team 25. The other two members, one is from the Bami tribe, just like Kaka, and the chimera clan, just like Fuwuka. He was big in size but did not come near being as big as Kaka. The other was from the central plains, and he was just normal-looking except for the weird innovation chain he always wore. He joined the Galka War Academy because of his love for creating war instruments. The collar he wore on his neck. It was rumored that one of his innovations had backfired during his first year and almost chopped his head clean off. Their names are Maita Chimera Bami and Banga Mindatu Wataida. The two were the ones Sagiri had not acquainted with most because they were mostly quiet and disinterested."

"I should punish you for letting your teammate get hurt." Senraki started as soon as the other left. Kaka snickered but held his tongue.

"He has not even told us who attacked him. He clearly does not consider us as teammates," Kaka finally said, not able to hide his discontent. He was the Galka Academy's top 1 student in both the art of war and second only to Kiuga in book work. Yet the boy had not learned patience and holding his tongue.

"It was my order that he not reveal who attacked him. Now that is not why I called you here." Senraki continued ignoring Kaka's outburst.

"Consider this your first mission from the marshal. Until the end of the friendly competitions with Konate, you are in charge of protecting the recruit," he said, looking at each of them to let his words sink in. There was a mix of reactions.

"How can we compete properly if we are babysitting? Maita spoke for the first time since they started working together. He was truly from the Chimera clan, like Captain Fuwuka. They hated going out of their way to help those who were hopeless.

"Well, recruit, do you intend to disobey the marshal's mission to you?" Fuwuka, who had been standing silently beside Senraki, said.

"I dare not," Maita said, jumping at Fuwuka's voice. It was clear he feared the guy, even though they were from the same clan.

"A warrior doesn't question his superior's order. I should punish all of you." Fuwuka continued.

"If the recruit is hurt again, all of it before the end of the friendly competitions. All of you are going in the suspension chamber," Salka added, and Sagiri was sure now that the man was willing to follow through with his punishment to the end.

"Yes, Captain!" Everyone saluted.

"It is not necessary. I can protect myself," Sagiri said, hating having to go be babysat as if he were powerless. He had never wished to tap into all the power within him like in that moment. He did not want to keep being babysat and taken care of as if he were fragile. Kaka snickered, and even Ulekai giggled at his statement as if it were the funniest joke he had ever heard.

"If you refuse to cooperate with your teammates and get hurt in the course of these three days, you will go to the suspension chamber alone for failure of cooperation," Senraki said on a serious note, and Sagiri's shoulder sagged in hopelessness. Senraki was more cunning than he had thought, and he was starting to pity anyone who ever got on the man's bad side.

"Yes, Marshal." Sagiri saluted the principal before he got back in a relaxed stance with both hands behind his back.

"You are all now dismissed," Senraki waved them off before he turned around, followed by his two captains. The boys held their salutes for another moment before they relaxed and turned to leave.

They walked silently out of the central pentagon, everyone walking upright. However, as soon as they got through the central pentagon in the wide space between the pentagons, before the fourth year pentagon kaka turned around swiftly held sagiri by the collar lifted him a few inches off of the ground and pinned him to the wall with force but not too much force like the one Makea had used to throw him in the small pool in the obstacle arena.

"Who was it?" he growled in irritation and everyone turned around swiftly.

"Hey, Kaka let him go, you are hurting him," N'varu Neni jumped in quickly, his shoulders tense looking between Kaka and Sagiri who were in a staring match.

"Yes kaka put the boy down, we were given a mission to protect him not to kill him." kiuga tried to pump sense into his friend but he did not look alarmed at all. He just looked tense as if he feared the situation could escalate.

"I have to agree with the Asakana clan king on this one." Maita started his voice low but dangerous. It seemed that he and Kaka did not see eye to eye since he made sure to call him the king of the Asakana clan instead of the king of the Bami tribe. He clearly did not like a person from another clan being called king of the whole tribe. "How can we even protect him if we do not know who we are up against?" he continued, and everyone nodded at his point. He made a good point.

"Yes, Sagiri, tell us who assaulted you so we know how to protect you. We will keep it in the team," Ulekai said, and Sagiri turned his eyes to look at the always jovial boy. All of them were making strong points, and since they were in bed together, he wanted to tell them, but his lips refused to dispatch the information.

"We might be a temporary team, but you had our backs in the shadow and broken pillar arena. Let us protect you this time." Kiuga said his voice was sincere.

"Besides, it won't benefit us to go around telling everyone. it will only lead to the formation of pacts since not everyone is pleased by your admission, and we will be stuck dealing with a bigger crowd," Zazarie said, and Zolinka nodded, agreeing with him.

"Talk recruit or I'll break you in half myself," Kaka seethed again, lifting Sagiri further against the wall.

"Besides, the mission was given by the marshal himself, and failing is not an option," Bukata chimed in.

"Tell them," N'varu said, still staying close to Kaka to protect Sagiri if need arose. A long moment of silence followed as everyone stared at Sagiri, waiting for an answer.

"The twins," he finally spoke, and there was a uniform intake of breath. Kaka snickered with disgust before placing him not so gently back to his feet.

"I am going to kill them myself right now," Kaka said, moving quickly, and everyone tensed. If he overreacted and went over and beat them to a pulp, then their mission was ruined.

"Slow down, Kaka, if you do that, our mission will become harder. Three days is a long time, and with the Konate students here, it will become even harder. We need to come up with a plan." Kiuga started, and Sagiri could already see his mind racing as he hatched a plan to vanquish his enemies.

"If we go out there as if we are a team too, we will make it even worse," he continued.

"What do you even mean? To make it worse, if we don't protect the boy, we will be punished. We can't stay away from the boy," Maita said, clearly hating to even be in the situation.

"Exactly," Kiuga said as if they had finally found the formula and everyone looked at him not understanding what he wanted. "If we were protecting him, then we would have to stay by his side at all times. That is what everyone expects, and it will be painfully clear that we are on a mission to protect him. The Tamelku twins are not stupid, and even with zero chance of turning the school into chaos to redeem themselves, they will. The Galka War Academy can't punish everyone if a full-scale fight broke out," he said, and it started making sense.

"So how do you suggest we protect him?" Kaka asked, running out of patience. He hated complicated plans and he would rather go in and break bones.

"We become sagiris' enemy." He dropped the bomb and there was a uniform intake of breath.

"We act as if we have been punished for failing to protect him and even have open arguments so that we don't arouse suspicion." he finished, and everyone nodded, finally beginning to understand.

"Then what? what happens after we convince them that we are enemies?" Zolinka asked.

"Then it will give me space to move into the next step of the plan." He answered with a malicious smile making its way to his face. Sagiri was once again left in admiration at the ability of Kiuga to come up with battle-like strategies. He was a strategy genius.

## Chapter 58: Chapter 58: THE ARRIVAL

Sagiri was training with N'varu in the combat arena when the gong went off. Just like Principal Senraki had said, the fourth-year cadets did not have any classes. Everyone was busy polishing their skills and bookwork because they did not know what they were going to be tested on. The tests would not add to the final score at the end of the year, but still lose to Konate Wild Academy.

Galka War Academy was not just named one. it only lets the best of the best join in and shapes them to be the best. Being the number one academy, however, they were always under pressure to excel even in friendly competitions. Failing even such a competition could greatly wound their reputation. Even the instructors across the divisions were tense. That's why when the gong went off, they moved first, assembling all the cadets in the assembly. They were dressed even more neatly if that was possible, with their coats flowing behind them whenever they moved. Every sash was tied in order, not even Lotaga looked unkempt. His braids were tied at the top of his head, and his zipper was zipped properly.

"Cadets move!" The voice of instructors echoed across the pentagon from different wings and arenas. It only meant that those from Konate had finally arrived, and it was time for the first showdown to begin.

Team 25 had seamlessly fitted into Kiuga's plan without facing suspicion. It had included walking through the gates, showing at most hostility. Kaka was the major piece, being the one who had the most outbursts. He was being held back by Kiuga from killing Sagiri, and Sagiri was sure that half of it was not an act. N'varu was hiding Sagiri behind his back, appearing to be his only ally, while Ulekai seemed to want everyone not to fight. When the other cadets got curious, Maita had snickered and said team 25 was being punished for insubordination and failing to protect a teammate. Zazarie added the ice to the cake by adding that Sagiri was just an aged student who did not deserve to be at Galka War Academy, and he deserved what he got because he was weak.

Even now, as they ran to the assembly ground, he was just with N'varu with Ulekai at the far back, while the others were ignoring him. Kiuga had said that he was on his own with N'varu and Ulekai until he set his plan B in motion, which he had said to share with everyone at a later time. Everyone seemed to trust Kiuga's Eye and strategy, so they agreed without question. It also served them since they did not have to babysit him so soon and could concentrate on their training as they waited for the arrival of the Konate Wild Academy comrades. They even had a name for it. They called him Kiuga of the eagle eye.

When everyone got on one side of the assembly, they finally saluted in unison before they stood in a relaxed stance with legs apart and both hands behind their backs. All eyes were kept forward as they waited for the new arrival.

Konate Academy arrived without noise. They fell seamlessly to one side of the arena, ushered by junior instructors of Galka War Academy. Their combat suits were dark brown, the color of dried earth after heat has pulled all mercy from it. The fabric clung close to the torso and loosened at the limbs, made for long movement under the sun and sand. The cloth looked rough at first glance, but it folded cleanly, silent when they walked. Its material was made so that dust did not cling to it. Light did not reflect from it. Everything about the suit was meant to disappear into the desert ground. Konate was situated far south and closest to the desert, and they were mostly trained in respect to hunting and war strategies in the desert.

Even their weapons were customized to fit their fighting conditions. Each cadet carried curved daggers at the hips and smaller knives strapped along the forearms and calves. The blades bent forward slightly, shaped for tearing, not thrusting. They also had a tripping rope tied to the left hand. It was the Konate special weapon and was mostly used by the tribes south of the west and part of the south of the central plains to hunt for desert beasts that moved close to human civilization.

Their logo was stamped in muted black on the upper back and shoulder. a desert scorpion, tail raised, claws spread wide. The design was simple and sharp, its lines angular and tight, like something carved into stone. Beneath it ran their motto in narrow script: "We wait. We strike. We endure."

Konate cadets moved as hunters more than warriors. but they were a perfect mix of both.

They did not cluster even as they formed in tight, neat lines. They spaced themselves without speaking, eyes always tracking distance, terrain, and exits. Their steps were soft, measured, conserving energy. Even standing still, they looked ready to move, bodies angled, weight balanced, hands tightly to their sides. Their mannerism is the same as the desert scorpion on their logo.

The desert scorpion is patient in the sense that it can remain motionless for long periods, waiting for the precise moment to strike. It attacks only when success is certain, conserving energy and avoiding waste. A desert scorpion is resilient, enabling it to survive extreme heat, cold nights, and scarce resources. In movement, it is stealth. It moves silently across sand and stone, difficult to detect until too late. In size, it is small yet lethal, capable of incapacitating larger enemies with a single strike. In awareness, a desert scorpion has high territorial awareness, knowing its ground intimately, and uses terrain to its advantage. It adapts quickly and adjusts tactics based on threat, environment, and opportunity. It may be small, but it is feared and commands respect through reputation rather than size or noise. Its aggression power is, however, its best perk. Its aggression is controlled, it strikes fast, then withdraws, avoiding prolonged exposure, and as if it was not already lethal, it could also endure under pressure and functions efficiently even when exhausted or wounded. All of these qualities were drilled and embodied in the students of the Konate Wild Academy.

They were trained for war where cover was scarce, and patience was everything. In the desert, speed wasted life. Konate taught restraint, timing, and the kill that came only after certainty. Friendly competition or not, Galka could feel it. These were not performers. They were predators shaped by sand and sun. Those of Galka War Academy squared their shoulders, not allowing for intimidation.

Finally, the captains of both schools entered the grounds, followed by the principal Zazami Senraki. His clothes were even whiter than usual, if that was even possible, and he stood out in the arena. He looked even happier than usual, as opposed to the two captains beside him, who were totally tired of him. He took to the podium being the highest-ranking host to welcome the guests.

"The long-awaited moment we of Galka War Academy have been waiting for is finally here. I will first of all invite Captain Mari Maragi of the Konate Wild Academy to take to the podium and officially start this friendly union.

"We come from the desert," he started his voice deeper than any sagiri had ever heard.

"Where mistakes are paid for with blood or thirst. Where movement must be chosen, and waiting is a skill. Today is not about proving who is stronger. It is about learning who survives longer when the ground turns hostile. We don't take any test for granted, and we bring the best of ourselves." His eyes moved across the gathered cadets before landing on those from Konate Wild Academy. "We hunt with discipline. We fight with restraint. And we respect worthy ground. Galka is such a ground."

He inclined his head once.

"Let the friendlies begin," he finished, and the cadets of both schools saluted him. Senraki took to the stage yet again, his smile getting even wider if that was even possible.

"Galka welcomes Konate," he said. "Not as rivals. Not as guests to be entertained. But as warriors shaped by a different war. It will be an honour to watch you, young cadets, polish your skills against each other. I will not, as the host, allow any foul play from both schools as the marshal." His gaze hardened.

"These competitions are not just games. They are mirrors. They will show you your weaknesses, your habits, your fears. One can not know their weakness and strength unless they are tested against a worthy opponent. I want all of you cadets from Konate and Galka to polish your skills against each other so that when you meet next time in the semi-final trials and final trials, you will have polished your weaknesses into strengths."

He let the silence stretch.

"Now then, cadets welcome each other!" he announced, and in a swift turn the boys turned around and in unison faced the others' direction. A heartbeat of silence passed between them before, in unison, they thumped a hand to the heart and in salute of the other.

"It will be an honor to fight against you!" they said in chorus before turning back around to face the front.

"I am proud to see your spirits burning with anticipation. But we have to let our guests rest. As our guests rest, so do you from Galka War Academy. Right after lunch, you retire to your dormitory wing, and our guests to the guest dormitory wing. We will meet here again after supper. Show our guest to the dining wing for now," he finished his announcement. Tension filled the air.

"Yes, Marshal!" both schools announced. Senraki left with the captains and division commanders, leaving only the instructor across the ranks to oversee the next step.

## **Chapter 59: Chapter 59: THE EXCERSIZE BEGINS**

The gate from the fourth-year pentagon groaned heavily and opened slowly. The students of Galka War Academy and Konate Wild Academy stood in full combat gear and daggers packed in their front pockets and side pockets of their suits. It was the only weapon they were allowed to carry, with the addition of the trip rope for Konate and climbing ropes for Galka War Academy, which were tied at both wrists with small hooks on the ends. The environment was tense. The space beyond the gate was dark with no flicker of light. The outer nonagon district looked endless with different kinds of landscapes. A wild wolf howled in the distance, and everyone shifted uncomfortably on their feet. The outer nonagon district was a whole district with all types of lives and creatures, land landscapes, one that would take a person weeks to finish. Even wild animals resided there. If one tried to escape from Galka War Academy or break into it, they would be lucky if their instructors found them first and not the beasts who were hungry for flesh. It was a whole echo system out there. Just like the Galka war Academy logo with a lion, real lions roamed in the outer pentagon. just like any forest, there were places which were safe and some where it was suicide to go.

In the exercise that followed, they had been briefed on what places not to trespass and not go so deep into the outer nonagon district for their own safety. The exercise was important for them to put their night awareness to work, but not at the cost of their lives. The 500 cadets stood back, rigid, waiting for the instructions and the word to start. It was 8, and the exercise was to run till morning, then they would start on another exercise, which would run till midday, then they would sleep again and wake up at night to start another exercise. It is as if the exercise was meant to take them out of their comfort zone and turn their daily normal schedule upside down.

The two schools had not gotten acquainted well. They had only managed to make contact during lunchtime. The clans of the west were prideful, and their pride met with

the majority northern tribe cadets in Galka War Academy. Among the many tribes in the west, including the Teshini tribe. Most of the students who went to Konate are from the lower west tribes of the west and lower central plains. The Rastumo tribe, who throw spears in the hunt with incredible accuracy. The Bashu tribe, whose ancestors were known as path hunters known for tracking nectar birds. The Zam'Fere tribe, who are forest night hunters who use glowing ink markings. The Kwelendu tribe, who are double-edged-knife hunters famous for quick kills. The Jandamaru tribe, who are hunters who run prey down over long distances. The Lofekeni tribe, who are frog-mask hunters who use slow-acting toxins. The Var'Moki tribe, who are cliff hunters who leap between rock pillars. The Hondugani are cold-forest hunters tracking snow elk. The Werashti tribe community hunters hunt in coordinated lines mostly down near the desert. The Pal'Noro tribe, who are spear-fishers who dive deep without air. They live close to the Zoli Seas school in the north. The Buru'Kandu tribe, who are massive game hunters seeking colossal beasts. The Xemurani tribe, who are bow hunters. The Yelgoso tribe brushland hunters use decoy puppets. The Midori'Kesh tribes, hunters bonded with hounds of unusual size. This, among the two dozen tribes of the west.

tension had been unbearable in the hall. Both the girls and boys of the Konate Wild Academy were fierce, especially those from the Teshini clan, just like Miss Lakiya. Kaka had to shake hands with the number one of the Konate, who was from the Teshini tribe. She was tall, almost standing at the same height as Kaka.

"Here are the rules of the hunt." Miss Lakiya's voice echoed, making all eyes turn to look at her. She loved the hunt most and loved games of the hunt even more. As you can see in front of you lies the outer pentagon district. Tonight's game is easy." She started, and everyone from the north shifted uncomfortably, especially those from the Galka War Academy. They were used to her antics, and when she said it was an easy game, it never was. Instructors from both schools and captains were standing in lines behind her. Senraki was absent, however.

"Tonight we are going to play a simple game of hide and seek!" You will only be allowed to play on the east side of the district, where the woods are thickest. We are not going to play school against school, but the game does not forbid it," she said, and everyone knew she just wanted the schools to go against each other. "You can hide alone or move as a team, that is. also entirely up to you," she continued, her grin growing even wider by the moment.

"The outer nonagon district is dangerous, you know it. So every student will be given two flares. Make sure to use them wisely. One is yellow, and the other is red. use the yellow one if you are in danger and need help from an instructor to get you out. Remember that it can also give away your position, and it's fair game if you are eliminated at that moment. use the red one. However, when the situation is dire and a captain or a commander will come out to help you. This involves cases of injury or the situation is too dire, in which case you can forfeit the game. it will mean you lose, but there is another game tomorrow night. You have to be alive to play it." She continued.

"The third flare, however, is for those who are eliminated. Each student will be given a delicate flask, which must be tied to the combat suit at all times around the waist. you will not be wearing your sash for this exercise, and in its place, you will tie the flask suspension around your waist. Each flask has your name on its holder and if the flask is broken or stolen, then you are out of the game. The goal of this game is for you to hide and protect your flask or seek and break flasks or tie the sought flask around your waist as a trophy. Once your flask bursts, you are to flare the third flare, which is purple for those from Galka and orange for those from Konate, and an instructor will usher you out of the nonagon, or you can do it yourself. This will help the watchers of the game who will be watching from above the wall to take the head count of the eliminated from both schools. The school with the least elimination by morning will be the winner," she finished her statement, contradicting her earlier statement that it was not school against school.

"Before I forget. the flask must stay on the waist at all times. If the supervising instructors on the ground find you without a flask to play dirty, then you will be eliminated, and you will not participate in the game tomorrow. I will be one of those supervising instructors on the ground. Now, in one line, walk to the four tables in front of you and pick the flares and a flask with your name from the fourth table." She finished pointing to the four tables on each side of the gate for both schools.

Sagiri was the last in line with N'varu to pick the flares and return to their positions. Team 25 was still giving him hostile looks, and at some point, he had almost forgotten it was an act because of how deep they had gotten into the act. Ulekai, being the bridge between them, had been the one to diverge the plan back and forth. team 25 had decided to stick together in the exercise. They were going to pretend to go first but wait for Sagiri and N'varu, who could come out last. Given the nature of the exercise and Sagiri's sensory perception ability, when Senraki had announced that the game could start at night, they had all agreed to use him to play whatever was planned.

After everyone was settled back in line and all the flask straps were secured to the waist, Miss Lakiya finally stepped back, allowing Captain Salka to take to the podium. Sagiri had not seen Lotaga, and he couldn't help but wonder if Salka had followed through with his threat to put him in pet-tending duty this time. Only now was he beginning to think about what types of pets the captain kept that lotaga hated to be in charge of. That was not his only worry, however. Ever since he woke up, he had an odd feeling crawling up his spine. He felt uneasy, and his body felt so hot as if he was coming down with a fever, yet his insides felt cold.

"Are you sure you are fine? You smell odd?" N'varu had asked him on their way to the outer nonagon gate.

"I'm fine," he answered. The truth was, he did not know whether he was fine or not. Only time could tell what was happening to him. N'varu did not believe him, but he did not pry further.

"The exercise is about to begin," Salka started. "Watchers, take position!" he announced, and all the watchers scaled the long wall in seconds running in maximum speed to take positions.

"Ground supervisors in position," he announced, turning to the remaining instructors. "Move!" he announced. Miss Lakiya was the last to move, strutting in her fanged boots towards the darkness beyond the gate. She stared into the darkness for a long moment before her hands opened wide and she released her hooked rope into the darkness with so much practiced precision. She swung away laughing and cackling. Captain Salka waited till it all quieted down before he turned to the cadets.

"Cadets ready?" he announced.

"A warrior is always ready, captain!"

"We were born ready, captain!"

Galka and Konate Academy answered in unison, getting into their ready stances.

"The exercise begins. Move!" he announced, and all hell broke loose.

## **Chapter 60: Chapter 60: RED FLARE**

It had been one hour since the game started, and Sagiri had not yet moved from his position right outside the gate. He was lying on his stomach, and his face was planted to the earth, unmoving. N'varu was on one knee beside him, his eyes scanning the dark beside him, unmoving, and did not dare to question him. Sagiri had not realized how caged he had felt inside the pentagon, untouched by the outside air. Now, however, without his oru-shells on in preparation for the hunt, he was experiencing the unfiltered air once again. It was as if he was experiencing the outside for the first time in weeks, and it made him a little homesick.

Just like how he used to do every time before the hunt back at home, he lay flat on his stomach and placed his ears to the earth to listen to the vibrations of the earth as far as he could. The animals' chatter, breathing, and calling sounds oddly made him feel at ease. Even the very earth under his skin felt familiar.

Sagiri filtered out the students' movements and feelings of anxiety, excitement, and tension and let himself be absorbed in the sound of nature. It was the best sound. I like music to his ears. Even now, more than ever, he felt connected to the earth. His skin, which was burning moments before, suddenly went cold as if merging with the temperature of the earth. Now more than ever, he felt at peace and connected to the earth beneath him, as if they were one. Just like when he was young, whenever he wanted to hunt for young beasts or just play a game of scare and hide, he always listened first before he moved. After all, a hunt was not just about being first and precise but stealthy and pleasurable.

"We have to move, keeper." N'varu, who had been watching him carefully, finally spoke. It had been a full hour since the boy lay on his stomach, and if he could not hear his concentrated breaths, he might have been tempted to think he was asleep. "I do not mind if you lie there the whole hunt, but the others will not appreciate it," he continued. Sagiri could have preferred to lie there another hour just to reminisce and relax, but he knew he had to move or they would soon become easy prey.

"Let's move this way," Sagiri finally spoke to his friend, standing at his feet. "They have been waiting," he started staring into the dark in woods.

Just 10 vaara into the woods, Kiuga landed beside them, his movements soundless. N'varu and Sagiri had known they were waiting, so they were not shocked.

"If not for the weird way you always do things and your senses weren't leg to leg with the Tamelku, I could have left you behind. I'd rather be punished by Senraki than lose to Konate." Kiuga said, running beside the two boys, not questioning at all the direction in which Sagiri had chosen to go. Something had changed with him, too. Kiuga was wearing a pair of goggles over his eyes that were tied to the back of his head.

"What are those?" Sagiri asked, his eyes adjusting to the dark.

"You did not think someone like me could just move in the dark without cheating," kiuga laughed, adjusting his goggles. "Don't worry, collar boy made them for everyone in the team. I had to be prepared for the worst when they mentioned we were going to start the exercise at night here," he said, handing over two pairs of what he was wearing. "The goggles have a black exterior and a thin centre with glass made mostly for old people and children born without good eyesight.

"They are not the same as the ones the instructors or warriors use in battle. These can only be used to see five feet in front of you," he explained as N'varu and kiuga put the goggles over their eyes.

"Now, Sagiri the blind, where do you think we should go?" he turned to Sagiri expectantly.

"We move to the quieter side of the woods," he said, and kiuga differed immediately.

"I might not have sensory skills as good as you, but I sure know that silence is a bad sign, and it means there's an even bigger predator lying in wait.

"Yes, but it also means most teams will avoid going in that direction," Sagiri answered, starting to unravel the hooked rope around both wrists.

"Sagiri the blind, do you want us to be fodder for wolves and lions?" kiuga laughed lowly, but his laugh was not humorous.

"I trust him," N'varu said, already unravelling his ropes. The other boys were flanking them from all sides, but they remained hidden within five feet where they could see kiuga. They all trusted him implacably, and they waited for his signal. If he went with Sagiri's plan, then they could all move in his direction without question.

"You better not make me regret this, Sagiri the blind," kiuga sighed before giving the signal. Silence followed before he gave the signal. Another moment of silence followed before the sound of the hooks hitting the backs of the trees sounded. Moving on the ground in such a direction was the same as suicide, and kiuga must give out a signal for everyone to get airborne and use the tall woods as cover. They moved silently, barely leaving the rustling of leaves behind them. They had been instructed not to go too deep, but it was never labeled as illegal. Sagiri, however, did not intend to lead the team into the jaws of death.

The other teams could have already taken positions because Sagiri's team was the last to take off. He allowed his senses to move out and take in the teams nearby, and for the first hour, he had not perceived anything. He stopped suddenly, and all the boys stopped moving immediately, all the eyes turning to him and kiuga. He was, after all, just the compass, and if it came down to a real fight, he was useless. He did not want to lead the team into a fight unless it was necessary.

Before anyone could ask what happened, three flares filled the air, bursting with force. One purple flare and two red ones went off at once, coloring the sky at the same time.

"It seems we have the first elimination," Kiuga whispered with excitement. The flares lit up the forest for a moment before it was dark again.

"There are no teams in this direction," Sagiri said to kiuga before he retracted his senses, panting. Running while using his senses to the max was tiring, so he needed to rest in intervals. "But it is about to rain," he told kiuga, who was closest to him. Everyone may have already known the last part, considering how the breeze had picked up, biting into their skin, even the heavy combat suits were not enough to keep the cold out. Sagiri had never felt the cold bite into him with such intensity before, and he shivered.

"Damn it, I may have overlooked that," kiuga groaned before announcing loudly that it might rain soon.

"Are you okay, Sagiri the blind? I don't think you fainting on us again will be polite," Kiuga turned around to look at the panting boy. Sagiri was perched on a high branch, his back tightly resting on the tree trunk, while both of his hands and feet were planted on the thick branch beneath him. His hooked ropes were secured to the branches above his head. Moving that quickly, using the hooked ropes to stay airborne, was more tiring than expected. His core strength had grown, but he was still the most unfit compared to the other boys.

"If you faint again, I will feed you to the wild animals myself," Kaka spoke for the first time. I can't believe I have to babysit. I could have eliminated half of those Konate scum to show them who is better.

"Hey, King Bami, don't underestimate an opponent. Besides, it is a hide-and-seek game. You don't have to eliminate others for fun. you can just hide and win," kiuga said, fanning the flames. It worked because Kaka turned around with a glare. Even with the blurry goggles, it was clear he did not like him, and the term hid to be put in the same sentence as him.

"I don't hide from anyone. Galka War Academy is my turf, and only those desert westerns should hide from me.

"I'm fine. We should move west," Sagiri finally spoke after catching his breath. He pushed his senses out again. He could not perceive anything at first, but the silence around them had grown deeper if that was even possible, and he placed his ear to the tree trunk, trying to shut out kaka and kiuga, who were arguing while they chased each other from branch to branch, but kept close to the others.

Suddenly, the hairs on Sagiri's back stood on end. He could finally perceive something. And finally, he understood why he had not felt it first and why it was suddenly so quiet. Of all the things they could have met on the first of their hunt on the outer nonagon. Why did it have to be her? and right when she had hatched her young ones, the Vorrash snake, the gravescale itself had been stirred. Either by the flares or the commotion between kiuga and kaka. He had never seen one before but he had heard more stories from his stepfather from back in the days. It was the only snake with two hearts and right now he could hear both beating slowly. the creature had slowed its own heartbeats to be as stealth as possible. If not for the power inside him even Sagiri could not have a heard it approaching. The situation called for a red flare immediately but he did not even have time to draw it.

The gravescale, a lethal predator. Its body was thick as a fallen trunk, scales dull and dark, drinking in the night instead of reflecting it. Each plate overlapped with cruel precision, scarred and chipped from age rather than battle. It did not move, yet the ground around it felt tense, as if the forest itself were holding its breath. Its head rested low, wide and heavy, eyes half-lidded but alert. The pupils narrowed at the faintest sound, a snapped twig, a hurried breath, and its body tightened in response. Noise angered it. Vibration drew its attention faster than sight. To add insult to injury Kaka and kiuga were making the utmost noise as they chased each other as if they were trying to wake the dead.

The snake was approaching slowly but surely. They did not have long for a head start, and all Sagiri knew was that they had to move fast in any direction as long as that direction was far from the gravescale.

"Stop!" he yelled, but the two boys ignored him.

"Silence!!" he bellowed with so much force that Kaka and Kiuga finally stopped. "The grave scale is ten feet from our position," he said, and everyone froze, only for a moment, however, before hoods hit the trunks and branches.

"Move!" Sagiri said not to wait for Kiuga to come up with a plan. The grave scale was closing in now and was quickly drawn in by the sudden surge of adrenaline, and they had a second head start. He moved in a different direction, and everyone followed him.

No one had the time to shoot a flare, let alone think. The closest to the beast were Kiuga and Kaka, who had run too far from the squad. Kiuga was fast, but he barely moved before the beast was on him. It swatted him hard. His back connected to a tree with so much force that it shook the branches. He barely had the time to get to his feet and use his hooking ropes before the beast was on him.

Sagiri felt the whole exchange, and he stopped immediately. The others breezed past him, except for N'varu, who stopped the moment he stopped. He had promised Kiuga nothing could go wrong, and things had ended up going completely wrong. As if things were not bad enough, the first drops of rain finally reached the earth.

"Why are you stopping?" N'varu asked frantically, almost going to carry him, thinking he was too tired to move.

"Kiuga is hurt," he answered, and N'varu posed.

"There is nothing you can do," he said on a serious note, and it made sense, but Kiuga had not failed Sagiri even once, and he was not going to leave the guy to be devoured. The guy was the greatest strategist he had ever seen, and he had a feeling he could need him in the large-scale plan.

"I will not leave him," he said with finality, turning around to head back. He could feel Kaka's frantic and anxious feeling as he watched his friend in a jeopardizing position. If he did not do anything both the two were going to be killed. Kaka might have been stuck up, but he still had no reason to let him die too, when he was the reason they were all so close to the Grave Scale's nest. N'varu sighed but followed him anyway.