

## THE LAST KEEPER

# Chapter 91 91: 89. INITIATION AND CONFESSIONS.

His peace, however, did not last long because something moved, not something. Someone, and there were many of them. His eyes snapped open in a rush. He had grown to become weary of any presence. This group, however, did not have a threatening air hanging around them. This group had a smell not specifically threatening, but it was full of mischief.

Mischief?

Sagiri snapped his eyes open on instinct when he heard the group move. Of course, he could not see anyone yet because he was so deep inside. There were a few hundred feet between them. The place he was seated allowed him to blend into the darkness, deep in the shadow and broken pillar arena. Sagiri could not understand how such an arena came to be, and if it was man-made, something must have happened to make it come to be. The pillars were tall and huge, as if they had been used to hold something up or as if they had been a foundation of something really strong. Sagiri could not imagine that the pillars were built after the fourth-year pentagon. More like the fourth year pentagon had been built around them.

On top of that, the shadow and broken pillar arena had a different shape from all the other arenas. It is circular, and the other is rectangular in shape. The approaching group had scattered, and when they started to move, he finally shifted his attention to them. Nine boys in total were closing in. One remained at the flat platform they gathered to receive instructions during terrain training. Another stood at the door as if to guard it, and the rest had scattered in different places inside the broken pillars.

He was familiar with their presence and of the nine. It was blatantly clear that they were looking for him for a mischievous reason, but it was no cause for alarm. It was Kiuga who oozed so much of it. It seemed that they had planned something for him, but did not tell him. None of team 25 had any sensory abilities or clan secret art of sensory like the Tamelku clan, but they were still good, and he was not going to take it easy. If he moved, he was sure to get caught. There was no vision and smell-impairing gas this time, and they might have lacked sensory abilities like him, but they had sharp hearing.

He now understood why one had remained at the central position. It must have been Kaka, and Kiuga must have talked him into tagging along. He must have come along after being egged on by Kiuga and ended up standing in the centre, refusing to show team spirit but refusing to be a coward, which was what Kiuga loved to tease him with, and Kaka fell for it every time. The other seven boys moved through the shadow and broken pillar arena swiftly, searching high and low. Sagiri was lucky Nvaru was not the one searching the area closest to him. Him, Kiuga, and Kaka had the highest probability of catching him, but as luck could have it, one had chosen not to actively participate, and the two had gone in different directions. Since he turned sixteen, his sensory radius had increased to more than a thousand feet out, and he could tell who was who and how they moved.

Kiuga loved being airborne and stealth, and enjoyed the hunt way too much. Same with Bukata and Zazarie in aerial awareness. They were masters of the air. Ulekai was the most fearful type, and if Sagiri could guess, the boy hated hunting in the dark, and just lucky for him, he was the one manning the place close to where he was hiding. Well, not exactly hiding because he was there first.

He came so close to the place but stopped where the shadows began. He looked straight into the darkness, and Sagiri almost thought their eyes had locked, but it seemed Ulekai was just pretending to peek into the darkness because after a long moment of pretending to see in the dark, he turned around just as swiftly and left to search in the lit places. How very careless.

The other boys searched their section and swept them clean except for Ulekai, of course, and after a while they returned to the centre position. They conversed for a long moment in low tones, so much so that he couldn't hear before they decided to leave. Sagiri breathed a sigh of relief. He did not know he was holding. He could not sense any malicious feelings from them, and neither had the thing residing in him warned him about impending danger. Even though the smell of plotting and mischief was too much in the air, he was still not alarmed.

Whatever they had hidden under their sleeves, he did not want to find out, so he stayed put even long after they had left.

After a long moment without movement, he finally moved. He stepped out of the shadows. It must have been a few minutes to supper time, and his stomach growled in pleasure. He jumped over the crushed pieces of concrete and uneven jagged tops of fallen parts of the pillars, till his feet touched level ground. The shadows were thicker now as he made it to the door. He walked towards the door, ready to get a head start, but he never made it. Right when he was about to reach the door, however, is when he perceived a presence. He did not, however, have time to react before N'varu captured him from behind and yelled and locked his hands behind his back, taking his option to wrestle free. He was still sore from writing for five days straight, and the angle he put him in restricted his movements completely. How could he have forgotten that N'varu was able to hide his presence from him to some degree? Even after his senses improved after he woke up, he could still not feel him.

"Caught him!" N'varu must have pretended to leave, then lurked by the door.

The shadow and broken pillars must have been made in such a way that if one was outside, they couldn't sense who was inside, and vice versa. He had underestimated Kiuga's ability to plan. Of course, there is no way the first display was his plan, and even putting Ulekai to search the place with the longest shadows must have been his plan too. Kiuga was the first to jump through the door with the biggest grin on his face.

"What is this?" Sagiri asked, his heartbeat increasing slightly with some sort of excitement.

"N'varu told me walls keep your senses in check," Kiuga bragged. Sagiri had never known that fact, however, but he knew that was untrue. The only time he had not been able to perceive the outside of a place was when he was in the suffocation chamber, and right now in the shadow colonnade. What material was the shadow and broken pillar made of? No other walls had ever stopped him, and it must have meant that N'varu knew something he didn't know about himself. When the two first met, N'varu had said that he could not tell him anything until he acted mature. He was sure after the sixteenth birthday that he had grown, and he needed to know now more than ever.

Right at the moment, however, he needed to know why his former teammates were abducting him.

The other seven walked through, and Sagiri could not for himself begin to guess the reason for his sudden capture.

"Now, which part of the body do you choose?" Kiuga asked, circling the two. N'varu was taller than Sagiri and more built, so his holding Sagiri's hands behind Sagiri's back made him completely unable to move.

"What do you mean, a part of my body?" Sagiri asked, trying to think if he had heard the question wrong or if it was some type of joke. He could not understand humor very well yet, so he perhaps thought it was humor. He had never understood what humor was and why someone had to laugh, since he had never been able to feel his own feelings till recently, and even so, he still did not understand the concept. Now looking back, he had never laughed. He wished he could experience full laughter, but whatever Kiuga had said was not humorous.

"Is that humor?" He asked, and Kiuga laughed even harder.

"Oh, Sagiri the blind, you are so naive sometimes. I choose the upper arm," Kiuga said, and before Sagiri could process the statement, a punch so heavy fell on him on the upper arm enough to dislocate a bone. Kiuga sure packed a punch.

"The initiation begins!" Kiuga said, laughing hard, but Sagiri wanted to hold his hand and groan in pain.

"Initiation?" Sagiri asked when the pain was bearable enough to talk.

"Well, you just did your first exams, and that calls for initiation. Everyone gets initiated by a friend after the first exam," N'varu said, and Sagiri finally understood. So that was what all the mischief was about. If they had to initiate each other in their first year, did that mean everyone punched everyone like savages? "It is used to break recruits in and to get used to each other and taking a punch," N'varu continued.

"If N'varu didn't stop me, I wanted to invite everyone," Kiuga said, and Sagiri wondered if Kiuga wanted him dead. He was having trouble with one punch from him, and he wanted more than two hundred cadets to initiate him?

"Kaka, you are next," Kiuga said, but Kaka just looked the other way.

"I don't want to be punished for killing someone who can't even hold a bow and arrow," Kaka said, and Kiuga just laughed.

"Just say you are scared to open his stab wounds," Kiuga mocked, and Kaka turned his head swiftly to defend himself, but instead, he went silent. At the mention of the stab wounds, everyone froze, too, including N'varu. Of course, it was a sensitive topic. Bukata looked like he could pass out, and Maita looked uncomfortable. Everyone suddenly had grim expressions, and even Kaka looked annoyed.

The earlier mood of initiating him was gone, and Sagiri did not know why, but he did not want them to feel that way because of him. He'd rather they initiate him with punches to break the ice than walk on eggshells as if he were breakable.

"I knew the Tamelku twins were behind. it was me who wanted to die," Sagiri said, and there was pin-drop silence as everyone stared at him. "The pain in my body was too much to bear. It's not anybody's fault," he said, and N'varu took a sharp inhale of breath. Sagiri was sure someone like Kiuga would finally figure it out because with his sensory ability, there was no way he could have missed the two vermin. Another long moment of silence stretched, and Sagiri could feel the irritation from Kaka go up a notch.

"You chose to be stabbed?" It was Ulekai who spoke first, looking like he wanted to throw up.

"Yes," Sagiri answered without missing a beat, and there was a uniform sharp inhale of breath, as if everyone had been holding their breath the first time, hoping it was a joke. When he repeated it, there was a range of emotions from disbelief to betrayal to disappointment to relief. Even Kiuga looked taken aback. It seemed even he couldn't predict a person wanting to get stabbed to death willingly.

Oh well.

"I almost failed my first assignment from the marshal because of you," Kaka gritted, taking a threatening step forward. Sagiri did not even have time to move before a heavy punch landed on his stomach, sending him and N'varu both back a few feet before they fell to the floor. N'varu let go of him at some point, and they both fell separately. When sagiri finally stopped, he felt his stomach burn as if someone had thrown a brick at him. He could not breathe because his diaphragm might have been turned inside out, and his chest felt inverted. It felt like he was dying for a second.

Kaka had not held back.

Sagiri coughed a mouthful of blood and spat it on the arena. He coughed for another moment, trying to stand, but failed. Just a moment before, he had said he would not hit a boy who could hold a bow and arrow properly, only to go all out in the following moment. How very Kaka of him. Sagiri felt his cheeks tremble before a small laugh escaped his mouth.

A small foreign sound he had never heard

## Chapter 92 92: 90. LAUGH

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It was short and abrupt, and it shocked even himself, and he stopped immediately and touched his mouth. N'varu, who had gone to help seeing that he was coughing blood, stopped in his tracks. It seemed none of the other boys had ever laughed, either, and they did not know if he had gone mad or whether Kaka had knocked the normal out of him.

So this was humor. Even Salka had mentioned something about not knowing humor. So something that made someone had to contradict itself, like Kaka. He had heard his parents laugh and jest, but he just felt their happiness and joy, and never experienced it himself. He always experienced emotions through others. What they felt most, but he had never experienced any too deeply. He tried to repeat the same sound, but he just coughed blood, and that made a small laugh escape his throat.

"Has he gone mad?" kiuga asked, his eyes narrowed at Kaka. "I told you to initiate him not to madness but to being officially a recruit."

"He is just laughing his pain away, I think," Ulekai said.

"Have never heard him laugh, bukata chimed in." Bukata said.

"he had never laughed," N'varu said, his eyes wide as if he was witnessing a bizarre happening.

I never laughed.

Now thinking about it, he had never cried. He, however, associated crying with a lot of pain, so he did not want to do that anyway.

"Does it mean we can still initiate him?" Zolinka asked. And there was silence.

"I don't think we should," N'varu said, going to help sagiri up, but sagiri was tired of being the one to always be excluded. He was strong now.

"What? Knives didn't kill me, you think your punches can kill me?" he said, turning his head slightly, and another laugh escaped his throat. Was humor, irony? He knew deep down that if the nine seriously beat him, he might have died, and the irony of saying a statement so contradictory made his cheeks twitch again, and that same sound escaped his throat.

"I swear, kaka, if you ruined my naive, blind recruit, I will kill myself," Kiuga said, still accusing Kaka. He had gotten used to sagiri being sagiri. "Whatever you have done to him, it is good. Let the initiation continue!!" Kiuga announced.

N'varu hesitated before holding back sagiri once again.

"Go!" N'varu said, and sagiri felt a rain of punches to his stomach. Even Banga, the most silent member, did not hold back, and N'varu was the last to hit, sending him to the ground. He lay unmoving for a couple of seconds. He might have overestimated his ability to take punches. He should have listened to N'varu and thrown in the towel, but his newfound sense of humor had made him humor himself to death.

"Aren't you going to salute your comrades?" Maita said, looking like it pained him to have to admit that they were now comrades. It seemed that the chimera clan had men who did not like admitting, and the Bami clan had men with pride. He tried to get to his feet, but he fell back down for the third time, and Kaka sighed. Sagiri's body might have had the ability to heal quickly, but the guys hit hard. Banga packed the least strength into the punch, but if he could rank his damage, it was a seven out of ten.

N'varu couldn't wait anymore, even though sagiri wanted to do it himself. He had trouble even hitting his right fist to his chest. He had to do it softly, not to accidentally kill himself. kiuga cheered the most and wrapped his hand around Sagiri's neck.

"How do you like my plan, sagiri the blind. I even managed to convince Mother Hen here not to talk to you in case it ruined your initiation," kiuga said, and sagiri wondered how he hadn't thought anything of it, and instead thought they had abandoned him. So this was the reason. He might have lied to himself that he was better off alone, but he somehow felt relieved they hadn't abandoned him.

"Don't call me mother hen or I might just take your spot in blade handling," N'varu said, and kiuga ignored him.

"No one can beat me in blade training when my clan makes them," kiuga bragged.

"But I hear sagiri beat you hands down," N'varu mocked. It seemed team 25 was finally starting to show some teamwork. Initiating him might have been the first thing they did without the instructions of an instructor.

Banga stretched out his hand towards sagiri oru-shells. sagiri opened his hand to receive, and there lay his oru-shells.

"I asked him to repair them," N'varu said. If Banga was as good as everyone claimed, then he for sure found out the use of the aids. He did not say anything, however, and just stepped back. No one could hear his hearing was unusually normal anyway. He pressed a hand to his throat and asked.

"Who made those?" the voice came out mechanical.

"My father, he is from the Mekarili tribe, " sagiri answered, and Banga shook his head immediately.

"Mekarili only makes metal limbs. No one in the Mekarili clan can make what you wear. Even we, the Wataida, haven't reached this level, and we are the second best, even the now leading clan, Fuzaka, can't make this. Only one clan used to make this, and they are not Mekarili." Banga said, and sagiri narrowed his eyes. Those were the most words sagiri had heard him say.

"What did he mean, the top two tribes of the central plains could not make the aids he wore.

Of course, he never questioned Bakuru, where he made the aids, but if not the two top innovation clans, then who was more skilled than the two enough to make such a complex material that made Banga feel the need to speak.

## Chapter 93 93: 91. ANSWERS

"I don't think you are going to understand even if I tell you," N'varu said. The two were in the arena above the fourth year pentagon. sagiri had managed to heal from the initiation punches, but one punch had not healed yet, and perhaps it could take another night. Kaka's punch, of course.

"I want to know now," Sagiri said. The schedule after the exam had not returned to normal, the cadets had been allowed a day of rest, and Sagiri could only guess that the instructors needed time to mark the exam to be able to release it in two more days. They could go back to the normal schedule after the exam, only that they will be arranged into squads now, and the textbook work is now done.

"You haven't remembered yet?" N'varu asked, and sagiri wondered what he was supposed to remember.

"I haven't, but as you can see, my body is now changing, and I can feel the power that powers my archive flowing freely inside of me. It's been a few weeks, but I have grown taller. I must know what I am and why nine people were sent to kidnap me."

"Yes, you have grown, but I don't think what I know can help you remember who you are," N'varu said, throwing a spear at Sagiri. They had come up so he could teach Sagiri the spear dances since he had failed relentlessly.

"Tell me what you know," said, caressing the long handle of the weapon. "Perhaps it can help me remember.

"I'm sure you know you are different, and you have something inside of you that everyone doesn't," N'varu said, holding his spear in his right hand, the other hand on his waist. Sagiri had known that fact ever since he could remember. He had always known he was different.

"That much I know," Sagiri answered, feeling the weight of the spear in his hand.

"Well, let's try to explain it this way. Let's say a chicken egg, a boiled egg. Someone takes the outer shell away and leaves only the egg white and the yolk. The egg white can't stay on its own, so it is taken and put inside another shell to protect it. understood," N'varu explained, and Sagiri was lost now more than ever. Had someone put that something inside of him, so he was the new shell?

"I am the new shell?" he asked, and N'varu looked to be in thought before he spoke again.

"Well, there used to be others who protected the egg white and the York, but then you are the last of those," N'varu said, and Sagiri tilted his head trying to understand the logic behind N'varu's words.

"Like a secret art or like passed down from generation to generation?" sagiri tried to make sense of it, not to feel like he was a cocoon for the archive inside of him.

"Neither of the two, but almost like a clan's secret art passed down from one generation to another. But far from it. The York is the echo, and the egg white is the archive. The echo is the heart of the archive, but they are one. This can not be learned like a secret art. You are meant to protect the two, and as you have realized during that fight, they protected you two because they can't live without you," N'varu explained. So he had been right about the name.

"So like a parasite and a host," Sagiri asked, wondering if he had been hosting a parasite.

"No. Your clan was meant to protect the shell from cracking, and by that, they protected the egg white and the yolk for generations until they could no longer. So in a sense, it is your sole and sworn duty to protect the echo archive," N'varu explained again, and Sagiri's ears perked.

"Why did my clan fail?" sagiri asked, and an emotion passed in Nvaru's eyes so fast, but he whipped it away and calmed his emotions so much so sagiri couldn't get a read in.

"They did not fail. Your clan went extinct," N'varu said slowly as if he did not want to explain any further. Sagiri had always known he was alone, but perhaps some part of him had kept hoping that his clan was out there and he had just been separated. N'varu's words made him feel a bead of loneliness he hadn't anticipated, and his eyebrows furrowed.

"All of them?" sagiri asked, wondering if there might be a few survivors scattered in the lands of Tagayia.

"Yes. Except for you," N'varu answered again as if he regretted even admitting it out loud.

"Did the parasite inside of me kill them?" Sagiri asked, suddenly feeling some doubt about the archive ever since he knew he had it in him. Was it going to kill him, too?

"No. But it might have been the reason they died and the reason you are being sought. You will know yourself when you remember," N'varu said as if he did not want to dispel any more information, and Sagiri was beginning to think that he should not have asked. Now he couldn't help but think that he was carrying a big target on his back that caused his clan to die.

"It might be better to wait and remember on your own," N'varu added.

"Can the echo archive be taken out of me?" he asked, and Nvaru's eyes widened. "How did the one before me part with it? old age?"

"No one carried it inside of them. You are the first. Keepers just protected it, never carried it. It was the last resort to protect it. that is all I know, too," N'varu said.

"What is the name of my clan?" Sagiri asked in a small voice, his hand tightening around the spear handle.

"I can not tell you that, but your tribe still lives, so you might be the last of your clan, but you have a tribe," N'varu said, seeing the gloomy look on sagiri's face. At the mention that he had a tribe, Sagiri felt some spark of hope, but he still felt lonely. A tribe was not the

same as a clan. Tribes had many different clans, and clans were much closer than tribes, even if their way of life seemed almost similar.

"And I guess you are not going to tell me what my tribe is," Sagiri said, looking into N'varu's eyes even though he already knew the answer.

"The echo archive inside should know the answer to all the questions you have asked me and many more you might have. As you have already realized, you know more than you should and about places you have never been to. The echo is like an eye that does not miss anything and a brain that remembers everything. I thought for sure you could remember when you turned sixteen because that is when a true keeper always emerged in your clan after the other died of old age or any reason. Keepers are like part of the shell," N'varu explained, and Sagiri sighed. If he was supposed to remember, why couldn't he remember then?

"Why can't I remember then. Is it maybe that I am not a true keeper?" Sagiri asked, suddenly wanting to be a shell to some egg white and yolk, which, from what N'varu had said, might have been the cause of his clan's death.

"Only you can be the keeper. You have been, since you were born," N'varu said with so much assurance that sagiri wondered why he thought so.

"Why can't I remember then?" Sagiri asked. If remembering could help him know the answer to all the questions that were burning in his heart, then why didn't he? all he had to do was remember, especially when he turned sixteen, according to nvaru yet he hadn't.

"That I do not know. Maybe you are blocking yourself from remembering. I don't know about that, but you will remember at your own time," N'varu said, trying to heighten the

urgency in his voice, but Sagiri could tell that N'varu wanted him to remember as fast as possible.

"Is it important that I remember?" sagiri wondered, and Nvaru's hand tightened on his weapon even though his face and breathing remained as level as possible.

"Yes," he said without missing a beat, "you have to remember your clan," N'varu added.

"What do you think might be blocking me?" Sagiri asked, but N'varu did not answer this time, and instead he got into an attacking position, forcing sagiri on the defense. He attacked the middle body, and Sagiri, though lost in thought, had seen the attack coming, and he blocked it. Even N'varu seemed distracted. He went for another attack on his head, and Sagiri used both hands to defend the attack. He held the spear diagonally above his head, deterring Nvaru's attack. Even so, the attack was much more forceful this time, and sagiri slid back a few feet before throwing N'varu off.

He did not get to attack before he was pushed on the defense again by sagiri going for his heart. He barely escaped the attack by side-stepping and arching his body backward to escape, yet another attack using the spear as an anchor and pivot. The head of the spear dug a hole on the ground as he used it to spin around to run from another attack, and jumped back to put distance between the two of them. Even though N'varu looked to be going easy on him, he was still not holding back.

Before he could land, N'varu was already on his feet, and their weapons met yet another metal-clashing collision. The two continued to spar as if it were a means to stop the wheels turning in their head.

"The echo was never supposed to know violence. So you should be careful on how easily you kill," N'varu said when he had landed yet another attack.

"It went out of control on itself when I saw Lotaga almost get killed because of me," Sagiri said, defending. The two circled each other. It was true, since he could feel it inside of him, he had only used it to hunt squirrels, and it had only gone out to protect sagiri or perhaps to protect itself.

"It acted on your deepest emotions," N'varu said when Sagiri attacked, but he blocked swiftly, sending him back on the defensive.

"Perhaps it just wanted to go on a rampage using me. you have said it's a parasite," sagiri said, defending and moving quickly to avoid two more attacks. He was getting faster and faster since he started growing randomly. He was growing thinner as he got taller, but he was lighter.

"So you are saying it controls you." N'varu stopped, and it was as if he were mad at sagiri. "You are the keeper supposed to protect it, even its innocence. It should not be protecting you, but you should protect it. If you let it keep picking you from the jaws of death, then yes, it becomes a parasite, and you are just a puppet," N'varu said, and sagiri stopped trying to understand what N'varu was trying to say, but he could not understand.

"What I am saying is, just like you felt a deep urge to protect lotaga you should have the same urge to remember," Nvaru said, and sagiri finally understood. When he felt threatened it had acted and when he felt pathetic and unable to protect his comrades it had acted to his aid. It could not be described as a parasite since it had saved him and Lotaga.

"What should I want to remember? an urge has to come from a deep emotion," sagiri asked, wondering how he could force himself to remember things he did not have a clue about.

"I can't help you on that, keeper, I'm just here to wait for you," Neni said, twisting his spear around.

"Neni is not a clan," Sagiri said after a long pause, trying to rake his mind and remember N'varu's clan.

"When you remember, you will know my clan and tribe as well," he answered with a tight smile before suddenly attacking.

## **Chapter 94 94: 92. SQUAD SALKA**

Sagiri had been carrying a spear around for the past two days, Miss Lakiya advised, but it was not as heavy as the wheels turning in his mind. He had tried several times to have the desire to remember or force it, but failed each time. Whenever he went to bed, or when he was eating or sleeping. He was trying to have that desire to remember, but the archive had remained silent through all his attempts.

His mind had not stopped trying, even when he was sparring with Bukata Zazarie or N'varu. The two more so had volunteered to practice and train together, especially when they learnt how badly he had performed. Maita had tried to teach him how to wield a bow and arrow, but when he didn't hit the heart of the target twice in a row, apparently, he was too damaged to be redeemed.

The Chimera clan are indeed the worst teachers to have as a beginner.

The exam results were to come out before the end of the day, and he already knew how badly he had done in the weaponry and combat tests. What was going to happen to him?

It was after lunch, and someone had announced that the results had been displayed in the classroom wing. He was walking behind Kiuga and Kaka with N'varu, with Zazarie and Bukata at the back. It was easy to say that groups had started forming even before squads were released. After all, it was a war Academy, and it required peers to compete and spar to polish their skills.

They were about to take the last turn to the classroom wing when someone pulled off the wall where he had been launching and blocked their way.

"Senior instructor Yavaga." They all saluted him and stopped. It was only natural to stand and salute if an instructor blocked your path.

"You can all go, I only need to borrow the smaller one," Yavaga said, tilting his head, and his eyes landed on Sagiri. Sagiri had been on edge the whole day about his results and the council of the ten schools. Yavaga must have come to pick him for that reason.

"Is he in trouble?" N'varu asked, looking between Sagiri and Yavaga.

"Yes, senior instructor Yavaga, do tell us what our teammate did this time," Kiuga said with a lopsided smile.

"You guys are starting to act like a team, I see," Yavaga started becoming Sagiri to come out from behind Kaka and Kiuga. "Your teammate is not in trouble. Even more, we need him for something only he can do. I will make sure to bring him back in one piece," Yavaga said, and everyone turned to look at Sagiri.

"Something only he can do?" Bukata wondered loudly, but Yavaga was already resting his big hand on Sagiri's head and leading him away.

"Maybe they need someone who can't wield a sword or a bow and arrow," Kaka said, and Kiuga snickered.

"I think it is because of his senses. No one can beat him in the entire Galka Academy now without the twins, whom he already beat," Kiuga said. Sagiri could hear them whispering as Yavaga led him away.

"If I see those two cowardly backstabbers again. I will break them in half," Kaka said.

"Hey, what's wrong with my back stabber?" Kiuga whined, obviously offended at the use of his style.

"Shut up!"

"That boy can't catch a rest," Bukata said as the voice began getting thinner, and Sagiri, even with his enhanced hearing, couldn't hear anymore of their bickering and speculations.

Three other men were sitting in the room beside Senraki and Yavaga, who had just entered. The antireality of Salka Squad was sitting in different places of the room except for Lotaga. Matasi, Kolu, and Salka were all seated. Were they here to send him back south just like they had escorted him north? Regardless, he saluted each of them before saluting the Senraki.

"I failed," Sagiri said. He had really done his best, but it seemed he would have to trouble Senraki again to take him to meet the council of the ten schools personally.

"You didn't tell him?" Senraki looked at Yavaga.

"His entire team was there, and I wanted to keep them guessing," Yavaga said. He and Lotaga were almost cut from the same cloth, only that Lotaga was much, much worse, and Yavaga could tame his madness sometimes.

"Dear Sagiri, of course, you passed the written exam, but you failed flat on the weaponry and combat tests. I only have to send your written exam south so they can look at it themselves. You aced the language exams, too. A perfect mark in all five compulsory languages. So Salka was right. You are indeed a genius," Senraki said, standing from his place behind the desk.

"Of course, I wasn't making it up." Salka snickered with irritation.

"You were leading in the first year and second year exam, third in the third year, and fifth in the fourth year written exam," Senraki said, and Sagiri sighed. His hand had been hurting so badly that he left some questions unfinished on the third and fourth-year tests, but it seemed he had done well.

"So the boy is a genius. Good to know I didn't escort a waste of time who would be expelled for failure," Kolu said, and Senraki frowned.

"Of course, our dear sagiri is a genius, and all the credit is mine," Senraki bragged, and Salka's eyes rolled.

"Why am I here then?" Sagiri could not understand the reason for his summoning now more than ever.

"That is because Salka is being a baby and does not want to let our best tracker back on the squad." Senraki did not miss a beat.

"He is still not well. I am not as petty as to put a punishment before an important mission," Salka said, and Sagiri wondered if the two were from the same mother because of how badly they bickered. If not for the fact that they did not share any similarities in appearance, Sagiri could have pinned them as siblings. Rusha always told him how he used to fight day and night with his older sister, who had passed, however.

"I need you to go on a mission for me. The region falls so close to the Galka War Academy, and they want us to solve it before they can send backup from the military headquarters in Galka City," Senraki said, and Sagiri snapped his eyes up to look at him.

"I am not a tracker," Sagiri answered, looking at Senraki wondering why they couldn't think he was the best fit to replace Lotaga.

"I still don't think this is a good idea. No matter his talent, he is still a child," Matasi said.

"It's just Tree snakes, it's not like I'm sending the boy to battle," Senraki said.

"The truth is, we can't wait for them to send us a tracker because they already think the issue is too small. Lotaga is the best at finding and tracking people or animals, no matter how big or small. Just think of it as if it is you hunting squirrels," Senraki said, tapping sagiri's shoulder as if he did not hear him saying he was not a tracker.

The Tree snakes are the most treacherous, and no, they are not snakes that live on trees, as their name implies. They are colour-changing snakes, and they could take any branch shape so well that you could not see them coming until you were sitting on top of one. They are also big and ten feet at least, and they moved into packs. If not stopped, they could even cause drought because they strangle small trees and dissolve the undergrowth. It was no cause for alarm, but they are also highly poisonous, and if a pack of those was moving randomly, then Sagiri could see how dangerous it could be.

"You can still back out, we can still get it done..." Salka spoke finally. Sagiri wanted to taste the echo archive, see how far it could answer to his deepest urge. Perhaps it could trigger him to remember because nothing had made him remember so far.

"I will come with," he cut Salka off before he could finish the statement. He could also use the opportunity to see how far his senses could reach.

"I knew you were a brave one, kid," Yavaga said with a wide smile, but Kolu and Matasi were not comfortable with the idea.

"We leave in an hour," Salka said, and the three men got to their feet, saluted him, and left.

"If you complete this mission, Salka plans to train you in bow and arrow if you don't die from the tree snake's poison first. He might not look like it, but he taught Lotaga how to use the bow," Senraki said, and Salka looked visibly surprised. It was obvious that Senraki was lying, and Salka had not said any of that. After seeing how good Lotaga was with the bow and arrow. It was quite admirable to know Salka taught him such skills.

Not look like it was not a word to use in the same sentence as Salka. he did look it.

Sagiri turned to look at salka expecting him to say no, but he seemed to be reminiscing about something.

"Yes, I will teach him if you promise to teach him using the sword," Salka said, and it was Senraki's turn to be taken aback. "Since you know how to put words in my mouth, how about I put words in yours?" Salka said, and Senraki pouted. He didn't seem to like being bested.

"Aren't you supposed to be getting ready in the weaponry wing and healing wing to pick up vials, not to die from the snake poison?" Senraki said in a fake serious tone.

"Hypocrite!" Salka said, but Senraki was already pretending to be busy reading a book.

"What position was I in in combat?" The words tumbled out of Sagiri's mouth before he could stop them.

"It is not that important," Senraki said, shooing them away without looking up from the book he was reading.

"You were the last across all streams in bow and arrow and spear handling, you ranked like most above average second year and third year students, and last in the fourth year, but still average, in dagger handling," Salka said, not missing a beat. The Asakana clan was blunt and lacked compassion. That was for sure. It would be better for everyone to stay away from the entire Bami tribe to be safe from heartbreak, Sagiri thought. He still had six more months to polish his skills before the final exam. All hope was not lost.

He and Salka exited Senraki's office, and immediately, Salka sent him to the healing wing to get vials already set up for them. Then he would go to the weaponry wing later on to rendezvous.

Healer Sayaku was already waiting, and when he mentioned being sent by Salka, she just pointed to another room. Sagiri stepped into the inner room and froze.

Lotaga.

"You insult me, and now you are taking my team and my place?" Lotaga asked, and Sagiri froze. He had not apologized to Lotaga for how he talked to him that night. He had crossed the line that was the only truth.

"I did not want you to get hurt again because of me. I did not know it was Senraki's plan," Sagiri said, but he knew talking to a senior instructor meant he had deserved punishment. Lotaga held a serious expression for a long moment before his usual expression returned to his face.

"I'm just teasing you. You should work on your humor," Lotaga said, but his serious expression was back. "Don't let any of my team die on your watch because then I'll skin you alive," he said in a grave, serious tone, and Sagiri nodded.

"I will do my best, Senior Instructor Lotaga," he saluted, and he meant it. He owed him for almost dying for him and for insulting him. Lotaga was in for his checkup, it seemed, and the wound on his shoulder looked to be almost healed.

"Now go, Salka doesn't like waiting on missions," Lotaga said, releasing him. Sagiri saluted again before leaving. Healer Sayaku handed him the vials before leaving. Lotaga must have been aware they were taking him, and he also knew Salka could send him. He was indeed a good tracker. Just as good in that area as Kiuga was in deductive reasoning. He had known they wanted him for his sensory abilities long before even he knew.

The weaponry wing was only made of one hall that was so huge and high it could be called a library of weapons. Salka and his team were fitting daggers into the straps on their thighs, waist, and chest. Everyone was handed several vials, even Sagiri and they all went inside different pockets. Sagiri's Combat overall suit did not have the same number of pockets as the instructors', so he just stood by to wait after putting the vials away.

Salka threw him two small blades.

"You will be our eyes because this needs to be done quickly. We will make sure you don't fight, but you can't be out there without a weapon. The blades were light, and Sagiri nodded before sheathing them. The other men continued picking mostly small blades and gearing up. They picked hooked ropes, and Salka threw two Sagiri. Salka finally picked a bow and arrow, together with Matasi. Kolu carried a sword, and Yavaga carried just more blades.

"Time to move," Salka announced after all movement ceased and the squad rolled out. Sagiri felt like he was a four-year-old walking among teenagers. He was struggling to keep up with them, even just walking along the corridors within the central pentagon. He felt like he was running while the four were merely striding.

It was going to be a rough couple of hours or night.

## Chapter 95 95: 93. ODD

"Time to move," Salka announced after all movement ceased and the squad rolled out. Sagiri felt like he was a four-year-old walking among teenagers. He was struggling to keep up with them, even just walking along the corridors within the central pentagon. He felt like he was running while the four were merely striding.

It was going to be a rough couple of hours or night.

They took the same carriage they had taken when they were escorting him to the Galka War Academy, or it was just one of the many that looked the same. They pulled further north outside the main gate, but went mid-westwards before going north. Further north. Galka war academy was already far north of the northern tribes, and so by going northwards, it meant the problem must have originated from further north.

Galka War Academy kept its privacy and many people lived far from it. So they had to travel for almost two hours to circle all the way around it before cutting through settlements that were scattered along the way to go north. The place was scarcely populated, and as they went even further north for two more hours, the settlements thinned out till there was almost none left.

Another two hours later, and it was just shrubs, then the woods. The carriage went on into the woods till the road thinned out and it could go no further, and so they stopped.

Yavaga had been the one to stir the horses this time, and he jumped down dramatically before he announced.

"That is the end of the road, boys. That will be a hundred silver stones," he stretched his hand out.

"A hundred silver stones could have taken us all the way to Lanka and back," Sagiri shoved his hand away before jumping off the carriage. Salka fastened the two horse reins

to a tree before he turned around. Sagiri was the last to come down from the carriage, and he was the only one who used the stepping stairs.

"This place seems so peaceful. I wonder what might have triggered the Tree Snakes' sudden appearance." Matasi said, stretching like a cat.

"Why don't you bring your young wife to live here if you think it's peaceful?" Kolu snickered. Matasi smiled at the mention of his young wife, but he did not tell Kolu off.

"If you apply that logic, you might actually finally marry and maybe continue your father's line," Yavaga said.

"You lack respect for your elders, brat," Kolu answered Yavaga.

"A man your age without a wife should not be respected." Yavaga retorted, and the guys continued bickering for a while before Salka finally spoke, breaking the bickering

"Here is the plan," Salka started, "evening had already come, and it was only an hour until darkness filled the horizon. Sagiri was beginning to understand why they brought him. The guys must have trained to see to some extent in the dark, and perhaps use the night vision goggles. "We spread out and search for places where there is no undergrowth, then we come and get the boy. He would just slow us down," Salka announced, and they all just nodded.

He must have been naive; he would be leading the search.

"You have an hour to move out and come back, don't engage. For today, we will follow the best trail to their nest. These things are slower at night because of the cold, but that doesn't mean you should engage. They move in packs," Salka insisted.

"You remain here, and don't move until we are back. Move out!" Salka said to Sagiri, then to the three.

"Yes captain!" They all answered in unison. Just a signal of his finger, the men broke into four directions, and Sagiri stayed put. He could sense the others for a while and for a distance, and even Salka, as if he was allowing his presence to be felt before they got out of range. Sagiri resorted to sitting back on the carriage.

He sat for another 30 minutes alone in silence, just listening to the horses grazing, before he finally felt movement. It was Salka and he was approaching quickly. Matasi was the second to arrive, and the Kolu. It seemed the three were the fastest, and they had not found any sign of the tree snakes.

Soon, darkness blanketed the horizon, and the one-hour duration for searching for clues had expired, yet Yavaga had not come back.

"Where is this kid?" Sagiri groaned, but he did not look alarmed. "If he engaged when I clearly said not to, he will be joining Lotaga in punishment till they learn to follow orders. The tree snakes, even though slow at night, were still sensitive to movements and body heat. They might have been slow at night, but their heartbeat also slowed, which could need Sagiri to concentrate.

"Let's go get him," Sagiri said, and the three men unraveled their hooking ropes yet again. "You are coming with, you better use that sensory skill of yours again if you feel him."

"Yes captain!" Sagiri answered, and they moved out. They were really fast, and they must have noticed even their medium pace was too fast for him, forcing them to slow down even further.

"What is the use of hooking ropes, if we are basically walking on trees?" Kolu was the first to complain, but even so, the three men fell in pace, almost letting him take the lead.

He was pushing his senses out to the maximum, too, and he had not picked anything, just birds and small animals. There was not even a sign of a squirrel. Darkness had finally blanketed the horizon, and even the moon was not out. He was moving only depending on his senses.

Something was odd. He suddenly stopped and dropped from the tree, letting himself land on the ground. He landed as softly as he possibly could, but his feet ended up making a thud. The three other men landed so softly behind him, even with their large bodies, without making a sound.

He lay completely flat on the ground, letting his ear touch the earth. He had long taken off his seal when they left the academy.

He pushed his senses out as far as he could, and even a thousand feet in the direction they were headed, there was not even one rat or rabbit burrowing under the earth. That was odd. There was no way there were no rats, not even moles who loved to burrow beneath the earth for miles.

"What is it?" Kolu asked after a long moment of Sagiri lying on the ground, as he used to when he was young.

"A thousand feet ahead of us, there are no squirrels, moles, rats, or wild rabbits," he said, jumping to his feet.

"A thousand?" Matasi asked in pure shock. "Your sensory radius has grown to a thousand feet." Matasi was beside himself.

"That is indeed odd," Salka said. "That can only mean three wrong things: either there is no food, there are floods, or there is something the little creatures are afraid of out there," Salka said, and the three paused.

"So you can perceive Yavaga?" Salka asked.

"No, not yet, he might have gone deeper," Sagiri said, and Salka cursed.

"Let's keep moving. You tell me when he is in your range," Salka said, and they all unraveled their hooked robes. They went for another 50 vaara this time, and since sagiri had not stopped, neither did anyone. Now he could not even hear any sign of life. Even the birds had stopped singing. He stopped, suddenly feeling tired, having to multitask. He might have grown, but using all his senses while he moved at top speed was still tiring. He paused on the branch of the tree, feeling slightly exhausted. He might have pushed himself hard trying to perceive Yavaga's presence, and he hated to admit it, but it was getting frustrating not having found him so far.

"Anything yet?" Salka asked.

"Nothing, I'm just tired from concentrating too much, I'll rest for a second," he said, and Kolu sneakered.

"Your sensory skills might have increased, but you are still weak," he said, coming to a stop beside him. "You should work on both since they should go hand in hand."

"Yes captain."

"Have you tried practicing when training or sparring?" Matasi asked, and sagiri realized he had not been training his sensory skills on his own time, just during the Konate Galka exercise and during Miss Lakiya's games.

"Just get on my back and just concentrate on finding Yavaga," Salka said, coming to a stop beside Sagiri. sagiri had not expected that, and he almost lost his footing and went tumbling to the forest floor. "Should I carry you like a child?" Salka asked when Sagiri hesitated for another moment before he climbed awkwardly onto Salka's back. Salka handed his quiver, which he had replaced on his back.

"You better hold on tight, and if you fall I will kill you myself, and don't drop my quiver," Salka said. Sagiri put the quiver straps on his shoulder and locked his hands around his neck for dear life.

"Let's go," he said, and they all embarked on their journey once again. Being on Salka's back was definitely a new experience. He was moving way too fast, so Sagiri felt like he was flying. It was as if he were not carrying a whole human on his back. Without using his energy, he was now able to concentrate after another 50V at top speed, which the three men covered in a few minutes. Sagiri finally tapped Salka's back, and the men stopped. The undergrowth was now completely gone, and even the trees had started drying out.

Salka landed softly on the ground, making no sound, before he let him down from his back.

"You feel him?" Salka asked, and sagiri nodded. Even so, he tapped his hand to the ground and listened, and he almost fell back on his back when he could finally hear him.

"He is close," sagiri said, his voice breaking a bit.

"But what? Let it out," Matasi asked.

"He is surrounded. It is as if he is sitting on top of the nest. He is surrounded,"Sagiri said in the agency.

"Is he alive?" Kolu asked.

"Yes, I can not perceive the dead. Yet," he finished the statement, and the three nodded. Perhaps he could perceive both if he practiced. He had been shortsighted in many things this far.

"How did he even get on top of their nest? Is he blind?" Salka huffed.

"Perhaps he was running from something. The tree snakes are not moving at all. They both might be running from the same thing," Sagiri said, listening to the thousands of heartbeats mixed with Yavaga's.

"How do you know that?" Kolu asked.

"The snakes should have killed him already," Salka answered, deducting the situation too. Perhaps Kiuga was starting to rub on Sagiri, but the archive was buzzing in a way that was putting sagiri on edge.

"Damn it!" Matasi cursed.

## **Chapter 96 96: 94. PRISONER OF MY PRISONER**

They moved in a rolling wheel with sagiri at the centre, covering the remaining distance.

"Has something moved?" Salka asked. His bow was drawn out, and the same as Kolu and Matasi. They had slowed down after sagiri's speculation, and they were now just a few feet from the nest. sagiri could feel Yavaga's heartbeat now since it was beating the loudest among the creatures surrounding him. sagiri drew his two blades and held a defensive stance, too. It would be detrimental to just wait for everyone to defend him while he was just sitting ducks.

"We can't go in slow. We need to go in, quickly pick him, and move out," Matasi suggested, and sagiri was quick to refute the idea.

"The tree snakes are not the problem, I could kill a full nest myself. Something is taming them, and as we know, they are pretty feisty themselves." Salka said.

"What then?" Kolu asked.

"We need to get Yavaga no matter the odds, so we keep moving silently," Salka said, breaking the formation with Sagiri behind him and the other two at the back. Soon, there was water under their feet as if they had stepped into a swamp. It was muddy, but the water had not risen, so their boots were just submerged to the ankles.

As they got deeper into the swampy place, the archive grew even more restless, the marks under his skin stirred, and sagiri stopped. causing everyone to stop. He pushed his senses out, but apart from the rippling water under his feet, he could come up with an answer.

"What is it?" Salka whispered.

"I can't seem to perceive another presence besides Yavaga and the tree snakes, but I know something else is out there, and it's close," sagiri said, shifting uncomfortably.

"You said you can only perceive the dead. Perhaps Yavaga killed it." Kolu said.

"No. It is alive. It is hiding its presence like Salka does sometimes,"Sagiri said, feeling skeptical about moving forward.

"A beast that smart?" Salka said, not asking Sagiri about the statement he had just said. He was fully concentrated on the mission. "Light up flares and throw them all over," Salka said, starting to move again, Sagiri behind him. There was movement behind him as the others retrieved flares. Sudden light of different colours came on as Kolu, and Matasi launched them on different sides of the swampy place. Now that there was light, Sagiri finally saw Yavaga. He was standing still as a rock on a raised rocky place that stood tall in the middle of the swampy place fifty feet away. The stone was pretty thin, and sagiri could not imagine the amount of stamina he had to have stood on the sharp jagged tip for the long duration they had been searching for him.

Behind him was a cave where Sagiri could feel the thousands of heartbeats of the tree snakes. Yavaga was signalling as much as possible with his hand while still maintaining his steady posture, basically on one foot with the other on top of it. sagiri always loved going for a swim when he started hearing too much and feeling too much because it was silent underwater, and right in that moment, he understood when he saw Yavaga pointing into the water.

"Stop. It is in the water," he said, and everyone came to a stop, even though they were now a few feet into the swamp. So something must have attacked the tree snake's nest, causing half the park to leave and causing havoc for lack of a nest, and the ones left in the

nest were basically prisoners. And now Yavaga was basically a prisoner too. The creature under the water must have been smart enough to hide under water to hide its presence, and sagiri just realized he had a blind side.

He did not know where the creature was in the swamp that was deeper towards the centre and covered a hundred-foot radius. Only one solution remained. He needed to immerse himself in the water; since the water was still, he could pick up the vibration of its heart, and tell its specific position. They could not get Yavaga out unless they killed it, and if it was so deadly as to hold Yavaga prisoner, then it must have been something dangerous. Yavaga had only carried small blades to kill the tree snakes. Perhaps the thing in the water had skin as hard as the gravescale, and it rendered his weapons useless.

"I'll get in the water," Sagiri said, and immediately, everyone said no.

"I brought you here because we needed to move faster. not to kill you," Salka said, and sagiri sighed.

"I can't locate its position above water, but I can pinpoint its location if I go under, and perhaps there are many. We can't get Yavaga unless we know what it is that we are dealing with,"Sagiri insisted. He could tell that Yavaga was strong, but the beast in the water was not going anywhere, and they could not just go in blindly. He had promised Lotaga to return the favour for almost dying for him by making sure none of his team died. A debt always needed to be paid.

"Absolutely not," Matasi said. "I'm not sending a child into a deadly swamp. It doesn't matter how many or how big whatever is in the swamp is. " I'll just make ripples, and when it comes to me I will kill it or them till morning," Matasi said, and Kolu nodded.

"You should go stand at the bank of the swamp and wait. That is an order," Salka said, and sagiri did not know how to refute a direct order from a captain. It was in the rules of the Galka War Academy to obey orders.

"What is a warrior who doesn't follow orders?" Salka asked, already taking a careful step into the water.

"A rogue," Sagiri answered.

"If a warrior can't follow an order, then we have no order. A warrior endures without complaint. It's in the creed." Kolu added, and it seemed they were serious about not letting him join the fun. He could not possibly disobey three of his superiors when they had let him join in their mission. He had seen all four men in battle and they were the best of the best. Perhaps he was just overthinking, and there was nothing to worry about. He saluted them with a fist on top of his heart before retreating to the starting point of the swamp. He found a dry place and sat down. The flares were still on, lighting the whole place though dimly, and he could see Salk and his team approach slowly.

He closed his eyes and tried to pinpoint the beasts in the water's heartbeat but he could not. The water rippled gently, and he snapped his eyes open. He could have imagined it, but the water was starting to ripple. Salka and his team had not moved three feet. It seemed that they were being as silent as possible and not to stir the water, but in the silence Sagiri sagiri placed his hand in the water, and he could hear the rippling of the water.

He was sure that no matter how much Salka and his team tried to move silently, the creature could see them coming. He could not shake the feeling that the creature was waiting for them to approach so it could devour them. Sagiri put his blades away, and his hand brushed with his secret weapon. He could have imagined it, but he felt it warming up. He did not have time to dwell on it, however. Salka and his team had brought him over to be their eyes, and he could be that without disobeying orders.

When his hands penetrated the muddy water, it was silent for a moment, but he pushed himself to concentrate as he had never done before. The archive finally stirred, answering to his uneasiness, and suddenly he could feel the ripples of the water. They were small, but he could feel them. three small heartbeats at the very heart of the swamp. They were surrounding the stone yavaga was standing on. Even as Salka and his team approached slowly, they did not care. They had their prey in their grasp, and they were just waiting to tire and fall into their bellies.

Muddy river scorpion? Sagiri wondered. These mostly stayed in the muddy river at the border. Had floods pushed them south, and when the rain ended, they could not go back. They were not so far from the muddy river, but it was still a few thousand vaara from the river. Had they been swept away as just babies and grown here?

Salka and his team were walking directly to them. It did not matter how silent they were. They were heading straight to them. The scorpions were highly poisonous, and once one could be paralyzed and just watch as they ate him alive. They were a savage species, and sagiri panicked. He had read about them in the central Pentagon library, and it seemed that it had come in handy. They ate fish and small life in the muddy river, but it seems the three had been taken out of their habitat, so they turned into carnivores. The only explanation was that they had tasted human flesh once, and that is why, when Yavaga came, they stopped caring about the tree snakes and just cared about eating him.

This was bad. No matter how strong Salka and his team were, if they were surrounded in the water or one of them got hit since the scorpion tail extended a few feet, they. Salka and his team had now covered ten feet, putting them too close to the muddy river scorpions. another ten or fifteen, and they would be in the range of the scorpion tails. They were huge creatures meant to stay only in the depths of the muddy river. They were not an enemy to be trifled with.

Sagiri's team moved another ten feet in silence, and he could feel the heartbeat of the scorpions increase slightly. Were they excited? They were excited. That was scary to think

about. If he could read the damned smart scorpion's mind, he could tell that they were. He could not let them die. He had promised Lotaga. Lotaga had not hesitated to save him, so why was he hesitating? Rules be damned.

Just two more steps from Salka's team and he was sure one could at least be in the line of the scorpions. Yavaga must have caught them off guard or, but they were seriously waiting for Salka and his team.

Here goes nothing.

without thinking, Sagiri charged into the swamp, but in a different direction. He made sure to cause as many ripples as possible. After all a creature was just a creature, and they had rules. The game that made the biggest ripples was the biggest, and perhaps they did not want to let go of Yavaga because he had made the biggest ripples.

The archive screamed warnings at him, and the markings on his body glowed, the glow barely being covered by the flares, which were already going off. His veins burned with the arches' veins running through his body. Just when he got into the deeper end, he jumped in, getting submerged in the water.

Salka and his team had not missed the movement, and they did not miss the movement of three large mountain ripples towards him, their excited tails full of poison suspended in the air.

They barely had time to react as they watched the three beasts go for the boy. They had also not missed where the three beasts had emerged from, and Salka cursed, understanding what creature they had been dealing with all along.

"Stupid boy!" he cursed. "Make sure its poison doesn't touch you. It will make any pain you have ever endured feel like a massage," Salka said, throwing himself into the water, followed by his team. Even Yavaga was now free, and he joined.

"This is bad." Yavaga cursed.

"I knew this was a bad idea," Kolu said.

"He better not die or I'll kill him for disobeying a direct order," Matasi said.

Things had now changed. Now that the three men knew what they were dealing with they the chances of winning had gone up.

## **Chapter 97 97: 95. NEXT LEVEL**

Salka and his team might have been fast, but the muddy water beast scorpions moved at lightning speed in muddy water, let alone the swampy water. They were not going to reach him in time, and three seconds were enough for the three beasts to tear him to shreds.

The archive screamed danger to Sagiri, and the markings on his body glowed so bright he could see underwater and how fast the beasts were coming. Just two heartbeats, and they

would be on him. Their tails were fully charged with poisons to paralyze him and tear him limb from limb before the poison even got the chance to kill him.

Just like that day when he had to protect Lotaga, his pupils went totally black, swallowing all the white and all the amber, responding to the power surge inside of him. His heart slowed to a mere one beat per three seconds, and it kept getting slower, slowing the movements of the beasts from a blur to lightning fast. It was as if everything in him was slowing down to concentrate on his enemy's every move. As if the archive recognized the weapon in his pockets, his hand went for it, and the moment his hand had touched it, it pulsed and grew in size in his own hand.

Sagiri pulled it out on instinct, and it pulsed just like the archive as if it were alive. His now black orbs connected with the black ones of the creature, beady ones, and he could almost taste their hunger. He could see clearly now, as if it were day, with the archive powering his eyes. N'varu had mentioned that all the times before, he had let the archive act on its own. Now he could feel it trying to take control and protect itself. N'varu had also warned him about letting the archive protect him always because he was meant to protect it.

He needed to feel the need to protect himself, too.

It was impossible not to feel like protecting yourself when three beasts were coming at you, and even though his heart had slowed because of the archer's power pumping in his veins, he could feel his fear and the adrenaline rushing in his ear preparing him to protect himself. He did not want to die yet. As if the archive and he finally shared the same goal, he could feel their will merging for the first time.

The will to live and the desire to protect themselves. He had never felt his strength grow to such levels. It was as if he had been stagnant since he attacked his abductors when he was twelve, more like since the archive activated to protect him or itself.

Just one heartbeat, and the first scorpions would be on him, the obvious alpha of the pack. He was not going to wait for them to reach him, and so he moved just as fast, his speed enhanced by the archive. Perhaps he had not grown in the best years, and even the past days at the academy, but in that moment, he was confident he had grown. It was as if he was finally getting to touch the real power of the archive, merged with his desire.

The long tail was the first to come at him, and his weapon pulsed with energy. It crackled and hummed silently before it snapped, springing with two blades from each end that were so silver they were basically transparent. The poison-filled tail came at him in a blur. The eyes of the beast met his, putting him in their sights, and it moved its tail, curving it all the way out of the water before it came for him. His senses did not miss it, and as if the blade was answering to his will, it moved in his hands as if it were an extension of his arm. It met his blade in a thundering and scraping contact when it landed. The blade was sharp, and even with the hardened outer skin of the scorpion, it cut the tip clean off. The purple poison from its tail splattered and flooded the water, turning it blue for a second.

The beast wailed and swatted its now useless tail around in pain. Sagiri moved through the water quickly to evade the attack, but just then the second scorpion responded to the first's wail and came at him harder this time, not to eat him but to kill him. Its jaws are snapping violently. Sagiri barely missed the first attack, and the second's poison-filled tail scratched him, but he moved quickly. The now tipless tail attacked again, however, and swatted him with a blow of its tail to his torso.

The hit could have crippled him if not for the archive enhancing his tolerance. Even so, he was swatted into the air, his weapon in one hand. Just when he was emerging from the water, it seemed Salka had released an arrow going for the second scorpion. Sagiri missed it by a whisper when he emerged from the water where he had been for a long while now. He could see the four men look at him with surprise. They were ten feet away now, even moving at top speed.

Moving on pure instinct again, Sagiri touched the tip of his heel to the spine of the arrow as it flew by and launched itself in the tail of the second scorpion. It was not enough to kill it, however. Perhaps Salka had done it to buy him more time to reach it and kill it before it killed Sagiri. The hit, however, made it angrier, and it came at Sagiri twice as hard, its jaws snapping loudly. Sagiri used the momentum from Salka's arrow to propel himself a few feet higher to escape the attack from the beast, missing its jaws and tail by a split second.

The act put him just above its head and its weak point. He almost smiled. He spun his body in the air a few times to add momentum to his next attack before he came down hard, landing on one knee with his blade and piercing the beast right above its eyes, straight to its brain. The weapon must have been something special because it cut easily through the scorpion's hardened skin, sinking a few inches deep. Sagiri was ready to pull out and cut its tail if it came for him from behind to give a last fight, but the beast died instantly from the attack as its heart stopped beating.

Sagiri pulled the blade out, spun the weapon in his hand as if he had used it a thousand times, and he knew just how to work it. It had now almost extended to his shoulder length as if it grew with the power of the archive. The one he had maimed and the third surrounded him quickly. The third's tail had swollen to the maximum with poison, some of it leaking from the tip. If it touched him, even with his abilities to heal, that could kill him or have him unconscious for a month. He did not have time to waste lying down in the healing wing. He had a lot to do and catch up on, so he pushed his senses not to miss its attacks.

Its attacks were fast, so one second mistake could be detrimental. He blocked with the sharp ends of his weapon blades, but the scorpion was smart, and it avoided the blade as fast as it attacked. Just one heartbeat, and Salka would be on it. One heartbeat, however, was a long time when fighting two aggravated beasts.

He drew one dagger from his pocket and threw it at the tailless beast. The second beast must have seen that as a mockery, and it swatted the blade so fast that Sagiri missed it. Intelligent beasts are the worst. The blade hit him straight on his left-hand bicep, digging all the way to the back. Pain seared hot on his hand, running through every cell, and he

staggered back, almost falling off the back of the dead scorpion. After being stabbed by the twins, however, he was not new to stab wounds.

Salka and his team arrived just then and joined the fight just as the third scorpion went for him while he was still distracted and disoriented. Too bad for it salka had already arrived.

He shut his eyes, pulled the blade out, and groaned in pain with every inch he pulled. Just the duration of him pulling out the blades, and the two beasts that were still alive lay dead, floating in the water. Salka had killed the third beast in a second. Well, it was a beast against a beast, and Matasi had killed the other. Sagiri was still standing on top of the dead second scorpion, and Salka jumped on top of it to join him. Salka looked at him in silence for a second before he saw the stab wound on his bicep. He had seen his blackened eyes before, and so he was not shocked.

Just then Salka's eyes narrowed, and he held onto his right hand, inspecting it. His combat suit was torn, and just then, the markings on his body had stopped glowing, and they just glowed dimly as they returned to their places. Sagiri remembered Salka had never seen them glow, but what he said next had him shocked.

"Did the poison tip touch you?" Salka asked, looking at the scratch on his hand. It seemed the second scorpion had scratched him narrowly, but purple was seeping from his skin. Had he been hit?

Just then sagiri swayed, and Salka caught him. His eyes returned back to their normal colour and rolled to the back of his head slightly. The blade in his hand retracted sharply and reduced to just a handle. With small, sharp tips. It fell from his hand, but Salka caught it with his other hand before it could hit the back of the dead scorpion. His reflexes were fast.

"The boy got scratched, damn it!" Salka said, and the others turned swiftly.

"Lotaga..." The words tumbled out of Sagiri's mouth, and everyone turned to him.

"He is getting delirious. Throw me an antidote. Salka said, pushing Sagiri's secret weapon into his chest blade-holding pocket.

"Lotaga, I protected them. None of them died on my watch," he said before he completely slumped over, and Salka caught him and carried him in his hands.

"What did the boy just say?" Yavaga said, jumping over a vial in his hand undone. He opened sagiri's mouth and poured the liquid down his throat.

"It seems I need to punish Lotaga yet again. It seems he asked the boy to protect us in his absence," Salka said, groaning.

"Is he stupid to listen to Lotaga? He took it literally?" Matasi sighed, and Kolu just made a clicking sound deep in his throat.

"Matasi, Kolu, finish off the tree snake's nest, burn the eggs. Yavaga, get firewood. We need to create a fire." Salka said, walking out of the water quickly and out of the swampy place, Yavaga right behind him.

## Chapter 98 98: 96. SPIE AND DOUBT

It was as if he was sitting on moving wheels, his body bobbing sideways repeatedly but not roughly. It felt as if the motion was happening so far away and as if he was buried under stacks and stacks of weight. He was pulled under but felt himself a while later. When Sagiri stirred again, the first thing his eyes met was the sun. He squinted at the big glowing light before he shut them and groaned. When he opened them again, he made sure not to look directly at the sun. He felt cold even with the glaring sun, and he was covered in a heavy, long material, a coat.

The events that had conspired before he fell unconscious flooded his mind, and even what had happened while he was asleep. It seemed the archive, just like when it had absorbed a whole book in the library, this time, it had recounted the idea that conspired right after he went unconscious, before it finally went dark.

sagiri carried him away after he collapsed, and Yavaga fed him the antidote. Salka squeezed as much poison as he could before he tied his upper hand. He also bandaged his left bicep, and when Yavaga lit a fire, he pulled out a full-on burning stick and placed it on top of his scorpion scorch. He flinched at the image, but in the archive's memory, he had not even stirred. He had not stirred. Even Salka and his team cooled the alpha scorpion that he had maimed. It was a big beast, so they just ate two of its limbs.

These northerners eat everything.

Even the archive had gone dark sooner after, perhaps as he fell deeper into unconsciousness.

He tried to move anything besides his eyes, but he couldn't.

"You were paralyzed with the muddy scorpion's poison. You won't be able to move for a while. It is a wonder you have woken up," Salka said. He was sitting on the opposite chair, Yavaga steered the horses, and the two other men were walking beside the carriage.

"I-I..." Sagiri tried to speak, but instead coughed. His throat was so dry it hurt.

"You are awake." Yavaga turned around and jumped back, leaving his post. Salka looked like he could scold him, but let it go. Yavaga put a flask's mouth to sagiri's mouth and fed him water just like he fed him the vial of antidote. "I was so worried you were going to die and leave me alone in this world with these people," Yavaga whined, and Salka ignored him yet again. Yavaga and lotaga were a pain in Salka's neck, adding senraki as the icing to the cake. It was a wonder the guy had not killed himself surrounded by morons.

Sagiri swallowed the water before he tried to speak again, but Salka cut him off.

"You disobeyed an order," Salka said, his eyes narrowed.

"The scorpions were waiting for you," sagiri said.

"And I would still have bested them. Yavaga had already told me that there were scorpions in the water. He might be stupid, but he is a protege in silent communication," Salka said, and sagiri felt stupid. Of course, someone like Salka and his team were just too competent.

"I promised...." Sagiri must have still been delirious. He stopped himself right on time from saying something stupid.

"You and Lotaga are going to the suspension chamber when we get back," Salka said, and sagiri wondered how he knew, but just then images from the echo memory filled his mind. Turns out he had told Salka himself about his vow to protect Squad Salka.

"Yes captain." sagiri could only accept his verdict.

"Come on, captain. You oughta reward the boy for his honour in keeping his word and his attribute to self-sacrifice. This is the second time he has saved your life," Yavaga said, trying to appear sincere.

"There is a thin line between honour and stupidity. This was not saving lives. This was suicide, and I'm going to kill Lotaga this time or send him to a border in the west for a year." Salka said.

"but captain," Yavaga whined.

"If you feel so touched, you can join them. There is plenty of space in the suspension chamber." Salka said, and Yavaga's eyes widened.

"I would never dare to question you captain. you are always right," he saluted and jumped back to steer the horses.

"It is not Lotaga's fault; he fought to protect me even though he knew he'd lose. I'd do the same for him," Sagiri defended. He did not want Lotaga to suffer anymore because of him.

"The boy has too much honour salka." Matasi cheered.

"It was careless. He could have died," Kolu said. He seemed to share the same sentiment as Salka. Salka sighed and closed his eyes. It was as if he was trying to think where he went wrong or where he failed as a captain.

The journey was silent after, and sagiri must have fallen back to sleep because when he woke up, the sun was already dipping, and they were past the Galka War Academy outer nonagon gates. He could move his body now, and with a few groans, he managed to sit up.

"You sleep a lot, boy," Matasi said. The men must have been walking for a long time since the carriage could not go fast with him sleeping, yet they did not look tired. When Sagiri sat up, Kolu and Matasi finally jumped into the carriage. sagiri could still feel the stiffness in his body. If it had been more than just a scratch, he might have actually died this time. Salka might have been right in labeling his act careless. N'varu could punch him too and beat him to a pulp.

"So recruit, what is this weapon?" It was Kolu who asked. He was holding a sagiri weapon in his hands as if he had been holding it for a long time. He was also the one who had been the most curious about his oru-seals, and he seemed very curious about his weapon.

"Kolu, our best spy here loves to know everything, but in this case, I want to know too," Matasi said, looking at the weapon too. It seems the men had asked for it from salka and they had been trying to figure it out, but couldn't. They were all looking at him with expectation, even Yavaga. It was only Salka who was keeping his eyes shut, but sagiri knew he was listening to everything.

"I don't know. It was the only thing left on me. that is what my adoptive parents said," Sagiri said, and Kolu looked even more curious.

"Where did your parents find you? Do you bear any tribal mark?" Kolu asked.

"My stepfather says they found me by the door," sagiri answered the first question but ignored the second.

"How does the weapon work? How do you trigger the retractable blades?" Matasi was the one who asked this time and Kolu looked like he wanted to hear the secret the most.

"I don't know, it just happened on instinct," sagiri said. It was true he did not know how to activate the blades and it frustrated him.

"How strange. Have been to almost all countries bordering Tagayia as a spy and have never seen such," Kolu said, looking at the blade with admiration.

"I have heard of tribes who used to bound their weapons by blood using their secret art so that the weapon only responds to people who share blood. You might be a descendant of such a clan." Kolu said and sagiri's curiosity piqued.

"Are such clans still there?" sagiri asked with curiosity.

"Perhaps being a spy has made you mad. Don't plant your madness in his head." Salka finally opened his eyes. "If your parents left you at a stranger's door, it might mean they were just desperate and wanted to protect you. going to look for them might be the opposite of their wish," Salka explained. What he said made so much sense, and sagiri almost wanted to let it go, but a seed of doubt had been planted in his head, and he wanted now more than ever to know what his clan was, even if it had become extinct.

"What makes a clan go extinct?" the question tumbled out of his mouth.

"Mostly war, especially the northern extinct tribes, others because of famine or just forced out of their homes and they merge into other tribes. Another very rare reason could be that they were eliminated...."

"Stop lying to the boy. There is no eat or be eaten rule of survival. If the boy goes mad because you can't shut up, I will send you to Lanka for a year to fight in the pits for the mad king's entertainment," Salka threatened, and Kolu zipped his mouth.

The wheels turning in sagiri's mind rolled even longer after Kolu had stopped talking and handed back the shadow blade spine. What could have happened to his clan? Had they been wiped out by war or famine or... but Salka had said the third speculation was not a thing.

So what happened to my clan?

## Chapter 99 99: 97. WORTHY RIVAL

"You don't seem like you will last three hours," Lotaga said, himself hanging like a bat from the suspension rod. sagiri had not said a word since they were both thrown into punishment together. For Lotaga, it seemed like it was a daily activity, and as he was just hanging his with his hands close to his chest.

The suspension chamber, as easy as it sounders was in fact a torture device. It was situated 30 feet above the endless pool, which Fuwuka had thrown Sagiri in during his first week at the academy. The twist of the matter is that when you are in the suspension chamber, you can't see the pool and vice versa. You are required to use just your hands to hang for the entirety of the duration you are hanging on.

It should have been simple, but it was too silent, and it was as if it was devised to scare someone to death by hanging on top of an abyss because they could not see the bottom. The chamber was made to maximize the fear of even the strong. the fear of not knowing how far you'd fall before hitting the endless pool, that is, if you had already experienced being thrown in it. If not, then you would just be scared of the unknown.

sagiri had experienced the endless pool, and he knew fast that the pool was. Plunging from such heights could send you so deep into the pool, which was hard to swim up from and even scarier than the darkness in between the suspension chamber and the water.

sagiri had not stopped feeling the prickling feeling on his neck that he would not be able to hold on any longer, and then he would plunge. He could not hang his hands because the remnants of the scorpion venom in his bloodstream had made it impossible for him to hang with his hands. Salka did not seem to care; he just told him, 'You have four limbs, recruit, if two are not working, use the other two.'

The man was ruthless when he wanted to be.

sagiri was hanging now by the front of his heels, his toes hanging for dear life inside his boots.

"You know if you keep thinking about plunging and how tired your toes are about to get and how sore your limbs are about to get, you will not last an hour," Lotaga said. He was also hanging the same way. Since it was his fault that sagiri got hurt, he was to join him in being upside down. The suspension chamber was totally black, and sagiri could just hear Lotaga's voice beside him.

"What should I do then?" sagiri asked, starting to feel mental exhaustion and the urge to just let go. His feet were starting to burn a little, and three hours was a long time. The ledge Salka used to bring them in had been retracted, and the only way out was to let themselves fall into the endless pool and swim for the remaining time. That was a worse fate.

"Just think that you are hanging from your favorite tree and you are looking at the sun. Don't think about the pool or your feet. hang just like a bat, and maybe just imagine yourself talking to the wisest man alive," Lotaga said. imagining Lotaga as the wisest man was the thing that stuck with him the most, and he started creating scenarios of Lotaga being wise or acting like salka and he breathed a laugh involuntarily.

"Did you just laugh at me, recruit?" Lotaga said in the dark, and sagiri chuckled. Lotaga being wise was the least possible thing to ever happen.

"You are becoming a little brat. If you can't imagine you're talking to the wisest man alive, then just relax like you do when you meditate," Lotaga said, and sagiri nodded before he pushed himself into meditative slumber. Surprisingly, it made hanging upside down easier, and perhaps Lotaga might have been wise to some extent.

After he fell into meditative consciousness, it was as if he was floating instead of hanging, and the rest of the three hours went by without many hitches. In the silence, he could feel his body healing his stab wound again. So the suspension chamber was about conquering your mind, and once you did away with the fear, then it was not as scary.

The three hours finally came to an end, and he was let out, but Lotaga had to go on for another three hours. only because he was sick. otherwise salka could have punished him to hang for two days without food and water. it however, seemed that Lotaga was used to punishment, and he could have gone for two without complaining.

It is almost midnight now, and Salka had not even let him meet Senraki before he threw him into the punishment chamber. sagiri was tired from the whole journey, and he did not waste time in his cubicle to sleep. It might have been the remnants of the venom or the antidote, but he passed out immediately.

Woke was almost late to wake up by a second, and Torena's eye twitched either from having to retrain himself from punishing him for being late for almost a second or from his distaste for imperfection.

After meditation, he was not required to go in the first year to train and instead went in his fourth year to team training. They have to practice how to combine attacks during an attack, and a mistake sometimes could end up in friendly stabbing in the back or accidents that could have been avoided. In a heated battle, it could sometimes be easier to get confused and stab your friend instead of your enemy, and it was not unheard of for a warrior to die in the hands of a comrade by accident.

however just when he stepped out of the wing, he was snatched away by a stroking hand. It was Kiuga.

"sagiri the blind i did not know you were that smart. You even tied with Kaka in the written exam," kiuga said, and sagiri froze. He matched his score with kaka asakana. That was bad. He had already proven he was terrible in weapon handling, and Kaka was the best in the area. Tying with him in the written exam was bad. kiuga pulled him to the result board in the classroom wing. It was not far from the weapon training arenas, and sagiri gasped when he looked at the results. He had indeed not only tied with Kaka in the written exam but with five other boys, including the long-braided boy Sika Makata, who had shown the most distaste in him.

kiuga was at the top of the board, and he tied with no one. He had a perfect score in everything and only missed half a mark in the Western dialect. He was a genius, and to score that high without the help of an archive like the one inside of Sagiri it was indeed admirable.

He was followed by Asari, who kiuga had left behind by ten points. kiuga was third in weaponry and combat and undoubtedly first in the written exam. He was the smartest boy in the galka war academy, to put it frankly.

"You scored everything?" sagiri could not hide his awe.

"Well I changed the spelling in the western dialect to the way I love it, and it almost ruined my perfect score. Those examiners have no sense of humor. You are the real genius here. You aced four years' worth of exams in just three months. Even though I did it in four." Kiuga pouted.

kiuga finished all his textbook study across all years without an archive to help? sagiri had never felt such a feeling of amazement. If he did not have an archive, he could not have been able to hold a candle to such a mind and to think that he missed half a mark willingly.

"Now let's go see Kaka's face." kiuga dragged him to the weapon training arena. It was huge, twice the size of the combat arena and almost the same size as the shadow and pillar arena. "It must be destiny that you two keep tying in your achievements. Now that the teams have officially become squads I'd love to see his face." Kiuga laughed, and Sagiri stopped suddenly, forcing both of them to stop.

"Teams are the official squads now?" sagiri asked, and kiuga furrowed his eyebrows.

"Yes, it was announced yesterday by the grand marshal himself. I forgot you were away," Kiuga said, his smile getting wider.

What was happening? He tied scores with Kaka Asakana and was placed in the same squad. How bad was his luck?

Sagiri was still lost in thought when they stepped into the weapon training arena. All the fourth-year cadets were already there in their newly formed squads of ten, except for the tamelku squad, which had only seven members.

"Seems he was not useless at all." The. The first whisper reached his ears.

"It must have been that he was admitted to the Galka War Academy because he is a genius," another whisper reached his ears.

"Even so, he is terrible in weaponry and combat, and I am glad he is not on my team," another said, and it was Sika Makata.

"Now they have two brain geniuses and a beast with a brain on their team. totally not fair," another said.

"Good to know they did not admit a total loser to our ranks," another voice said, and sagiri stopped.

"Galka is still a war academy. His brain won't help him if he can't fight," another whisper joined in.

The whispers had somehow changed from those of scorn to those mixed between acceptance and challenge. Some saw him now as a challenge, and some thought he was almost deserving of his position. Yet others were still not satisfied with his weapon handling.

Even so, he felt a certain swelling in his heart. Doing well and proving himself had given him a rank in everyone's eyes, and at least he was now not seen as a nuisance. Salka had been right when he said his genius brain could earn him some respect. But with respect came even more rivals, and he did not know why, but he could feel some pride swelling in his chest.

"Are you two going to stand there all day? We have a thousand formations to perfect," Kaka snapped, and sagiri came down to earth. His eyes were narrowed, and sagiri could not tell for a long time what the boy was feeling.

"Kaka, it seems you two are tied with fate," kiuga said when they got close enough.

"Shut up. He needs to rival me in weaponry to even be tied by fate with me. "I only accept rivals who beat me," kiuga said. Of course Kaka was Kaka; he only cared about being the best, and with Sagiri's skills in weaponry, he had a long way before they stood even on a close footing.

somehow that lit a fire within him. He wanted to be a worthy rival to Kaka Asakana.

## Chapter 100 100: 98: THE PIT

He tried to pull his feet out of the mud as quickly as possible, but he was not fast enough. Who even makes a fighting bear out of mad? His opponent was a beast-sized titan of a man, and he smiled down at his tragedy. He smiled widely, and his fist came down hard and smacked him across the face. His head smacked violently to the side, and he went flying a few feet in the air before he landed on his back.

The giant of a man cheered and lifted both his hands to the sky, and the crowd outside the arena cheered loudly.

"Finish him!! Finish him up!!"

Sir Black must have been used to pain and quite enjoyed causing pain to others, but he treasured his face more than anything. He twisted his head to the side and spat a mouthful of blood. His jaw might have just been dislocated, and he knew it was going to hurt for a while. The chants got higher and higher, and he must have overestimated himself to think that he could go against the champion in the ring.

The man had been undefeated for half a decade now, and everyone who went against him died. No one dared to challenge him anymore, and so to keep entertaining the king of Lanka with the fights, only the gullible and the desperate got lured in to fight. and the criminals too. Those who had committed crimes were thrown into the ring with the beast.

Sir Black could have used other ways to land in the most deadly prison of Lanka, but this one might have been the easiest. Of course, it was not his forte to act like he was gullible, so he just spoke badly about the king of Lanka in public, speaking about how his rule was a dictatorship and the normal people were tired.

Lanka was ruled by a tyrannical king vanga. The man ruled with an iron fist. Speaking about his rule in public negatively guaranteed prison time, and what better way to meet the man he wanted to meet than going to prison? His plan, however, had been spoiled, and he had been thrown into a match of death that was beginning to wear him out. His red coat had now been tattered, and he hated being filthy. He hated filth on his clothes.

The beast of a man jumped a few feet in the air with two fists together before he landed, and sir black knew that if he landed on his chest, he was a dead man. well damn it. He rolled away as fast as he could on the mad and barely missed the attack. Where the man had landed, however, a depression formed. Who even gave birth to such a big man? Such a cruel difference in genetics angered him to no end.

The man was fast, even with his size, and the madness in the fighting pit did not seem to stall him at all. Just dodging the attacks and running was not going to save him. Another attack landed on him and he was thrown into the wall of the pit. black danced in his vision for a while, and breath rushed out of his lungs. He could feel himself struggling to breathe and he hated the odds he had been put into. The outcome was glaringly clear, and if something did not change, he was going to die. for sure.

The man reached him in a moment again and landed another blow to his torso. The sound of his lungs breaking reached his ears, and his vision all but swam. How was someone that huge so fast? The man smiled an ugly smile at him as if he enjoyed causing pain. In that degree, they were the same, and they shared the same hunger for destruction. A smile of his own reached his lips. He and everyone like him are what is wrong with the world. How ironic, he always felt seen when he met someone like him, and yet at the same time, he felt repulsed.

The man grabbed sir black by the neck and lifted him as if he were a rag doll. The crowd went wild. This is the reason that motivated sir black to watch his general build another world. a world where people did not cheer when another person was seconds away from death. sir black shut his eyes for a second and listened to the crowd as they chanted away.

"Finish him!! Finish him!!" cheering, and laughter echoed in the arena surrounding the pit. King Vanka Sevara was at his seat, seeping wine, watching with hungry eyes for his champion to finish yet another man. sir black opened his eyes. It was now or never. After all, he was worse off than anyone in that arena. He could not die just yet. Vanka also always promised to grant a wish to a champion, and he needed a wish to be granted. His plan might not have gone the way he wanted, but he could twist the current situation to his favour.

He was after all not a man to come out and fight with a plan B. He had been waiting for this moment since the start of the fight. This was the final move of the champion. He always lifted his victims by their necks to show his power and dominance before he broke their necks for the whole crowd. It was his ultimate move. The neck breaker.

With his tongue, sir black moved the thing in his mouth. He bit down hard on it, and the liquid flooded his mouth so hot he almost screamed. He did not hesitate, and when the champion turned his eyes from the crowd to look at him one last time before he could break his neck, sir black opened his mouth and spat the black substance into the beast's eyes, making sure to land it. There was a momentary pause as sir black moved his tongue again and retrieved another pill in his mouth before he chewed and swallowed.

The substance he had spat out was so lethal it could have burned his tongue if he had not swallowed the follow-up pill immediately. It took the champion a few moments to register what had happened when his eyes twitched and started burning.

sir black smiled as the man blinked rapidly before he let out an earth-shattering roar of pain, and finally, sir black chuckled.

"You enjoy causing pain to others, and so do I. That is why I have to stop people like you. There can only be one of us," sir black said. "Next time, don't take too long to finish me. Excuse me, there is no next time," sir black chuckled, ignoring his burning tongue that,

even with the antidote, still burned a little. The tongue was the part of the human body that healed quickly.

The man roared again, throwing sir black away with too much force, so he could use both his hands to soothe his eyes. sir black landed, a few feet away, so fast he was not able to break the fall. As two more ribs broke, he did not stop cackling. Victory always came at a price, and he loved to win. The crowd had now gone quiet, and only the sound of his laughter could be heard, along with the roaring of pain of the champion.

Even so, sir black knew that to be champion, he had to finish the current champion and get his wish granted.

Weapons were not allowed in the pit, but what if you buried one in the mud before the fight? Of course then it won't be seen as a breach of the rules. sir black ran across the arena and retrieved his two small blades he had had someone bury in the dirt. Of course the person knew he was gonna lose anyway, but still buried them for the fun of it after getting paid half with another promise of getting the other half after the game.

He ran back across the mud, the pleasure of hearing the champion roar in pain pushing him to the limit. Even as the man roared, he still tried to swat sir black away, but with his eyes now empty sockets from the burning substance, he was just swatting the air desperately. Even so, sire black had to be careful not to get swatted away. A wounded beast was sometimes worse than a hungry one. sir black slashed away like the madman he was while he laughed, and the blood from the champion splattered on his red coat, painting it red. His favorite colour.

"I'm going to tell you a secret before you die," Sir black said, slashing the tendons at the back of the heels, sending the man forward onto his knees, and finally they were standing at the same height.

"You don't play with honour," the man spat, even though he had been stripped of almost everything. It seemed his pride was intact. That did not shock sir black at all. They were both cut from the same cloth, and their pride in whatever they did was one thing they never lost.

"I am not from Lanka. you have just lost to a man from Tagayia," sir black said, and just as the man opened his mouth to obviously set him up in one move, sir black slashed his mouth, taking his tongue with him in one move, and with the blow, he smashed his throat, ear to ear.

"You are really bad at keeping a secret," Sir black tsked before he lunged both blades on each side of the fat neck.