

KEIBUKEIOIBA

WHEN THE FOREST WAKES

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Prologue

The Pitcher That Would Not Hold

Long before the forest learned to speak in whispers, before the mountain bore scars of wire and steel, there lived a man whom the world would later refuse to name properly.

They would call him a beast.

They would call him a demon.

But in the beginning, he was only **Keibukeioiba**—half man, half tiger, and wholly alone.

Thabaton lived at the edge of Tokpa Khul, where the huts leaned inward at night as if sharing secrets. She was the youngest sister among seven brothers, raised on caution and stories that warned women to bolt their doors before dusk. Her brothers hunted and fished, returning with tales of spirits that mimicked human voices and shadows that remembered faces.

Thabaton listened.

She remembered.

But she did not always believe.

On the night Keibukeioiba came, the moon hung low and pale, as if undecided about watching. A voice called from outside her hut. “Thabaton,” it said. “Open the door, your seven brothers have come home.” It was her eldest brother’s voice—steady, familiar, carrying the mild impatience of someone who had forgotten something inside. She

hesitated. “There is no time,” the voice replied. “Open the door.” The latch slid back. The door did not creak as it should have. It moved too smoothly, too willingly. And when the opening widened, the shape that filled it was wrong—taller, broader, shadowed by stripes that shimmered in moonlight.

Thabaton tried to scream. Keibukeioiba covered her mouth gently, almost apologetically. “I will not harm you,” he said—not in her brother’s voice now, but in his own, deep and resonant, heavy with something that sounded like longing. “But you must come with me.” The forest swallowed them whole.

Keibukeioiba did not keep Thabaton as a captive in the way men understand captivity. He built her a dwelling where the trees thinned and light filtered softly through leaves. He brought her fruit, roots, and honey gathered with careful claws. He never struck her. He never raised his voice. When he spoke, it was always with the deliberateness of someone afraid of saying too much and frightening what he loved. “I will make you my wife,” he told her one morning, as mist curled around the clearing. “You will be safe here.” Thabaton did not answer. Safety, she had learned, could be another word for enclosure.

Seasons passed. She learned the rhythms of the forest, the silence before rain, the way Keibukeioiba paced at the boundary of his world like a guardian unsure of his own claim. At night, he would sit apart, watching her sleep, as though fearful that closeness might undo him.

Sometimes she spoke to him.

Sometimes she sang.

Always, she waited.

Far away, in Tokpa Khul, her seven brothers mourned her as lost. Then one night, they followed a trail no one else could see. The brothers did not rush to confront the tiger-man. They were not fools. They watched from the undergrowth, studying his habits, learning when he roamed and when he lingered. They saw that he left

Thabaton alone during certain hours, trusting the forest more than walls. They whispered their plan to her when Keibukeioiba slept beneath the fig tree, his breath heavy with exhaustion. Thabaton listened without interruption. When they finished, she nodded once. "I will do it," she said.

The river shimmered under the sun when Thabaton approached Keibukeioiba the next morning. "Fetch me water," she said softly. "From the bend where the stones are smooth." She handed him the pitcher. Keibukeioiba took it without suspicion. He did not notice the small hole bored cleanly through its base. He did not think to question why she watched him so intently as he walked away. At the riverbank, he knelt and lowered the pitcher into the water. It did not fill. He frowned and lifted it again. Water streamed uselessly through the hole, spilling back into the river.

Again.

And again.

Confusion crept in, slow and unfamiliar. He turned the pitcher in his hands, searching for fault, for explanation. A crow laughed around the stones, indifferent to his effort. Behind him, the forest shifted. Keibukeioiba looked up. The clearing was empty and his hut was burnt. A sound—human voices, hurried and urgent—echoed faintly through the trees.

Thabaton was gone.

Keibukeioiba stood motionless for a long time, the broken pitcher slipping from his grasp and shattering on the stones. He neither roared nor chased but simply sank to his knees at the river's edge, water soaking into his fur, and understood—too late—the difference between love and possession.

By the time he rose, the forest had already begun to close the path behind her. Keibukeioiba turned away from the river and walked into the deepest part of the mountain, carrying with him a grief that would

not die, a love that had nowhere to go, and a name the world would one day remember incorrectly.

The forest absorbed him.

And waited.

Chapter 1

The Equation That Would Not Sleep

The Puya resisted light. Dr. Chingsanglakpa had noticed this years ago, but only now—under the calibrated glow of a quantum-optical desk lamp—did the resistance trouble him. The *Agarwood* manuscript absorbed illumination unevenly, as if certain glyphs swallowed photons while others reflected them with a dull, ancient patience. This was not a metaphor. His instruments confirmed it. “Nonlinear absorption,” he murmured, fingers hovering above the manuscript but never touching it without gloves. “Localised photonic damping.” The words felt absurdly applied to something catalogued by archivists as *folk scripture*. Outside, the rain over Imphal tapped the laboratory’s smart-glass roof in asynchronous rhythms. Inside, the private lab hummed softly—no institutional branding, no government oversight, no grant-number plaques. Just machines, silence, and a man who had walked away from prestige to chase a question that refused to die.

Chingsanglakpa had trained in the world’s cleanest laboratories. His postdoctoral years at Harvard University had been defined by sterility—white rooms, reproducible results, applause that followed fashionable conclusions. He had published on quantum coherence in biological systems, on tunnelling effects in enzymatic reactions, and on the theoretical limits of bio-information density. But none of that had prepared him for the puyas. They had come to him not as belief, but as data.

The first anomaly appeared three years ago, when he began digitising Manipuri manuscripts for a cultural preservation project, he funded himself. While scanning a damaged puya referencing Keibukeioiba, the half-man half-tiger of forest lore, the spectrograph spiked. Random noise, his assistant had suggested. Chingsanglakpa had repeated the scan twelve times. The noise repeated too. Now, deep into the night, he leaned back and exhaled slowly, eyes never leaving the manuscript. The puya lay open to a passage describing the *vanishing*—not death, not ascension, but something far more ambiguous.

He was not taken by the gods nor slain by men.

He was received by the forest, as a wound is received by flesh.

The verse had always unsettled him.

In Western science, disappearance implied loss of information. In Manipuri cosmology, disappearance implied *redistribution*. Chingsanglakpa stood and crossed the lab to a wall-length display, gesturing midair. The manuscript's quantum scan unfolded into layered visualisations—photon decay curves, vibrational frequency maps, molecular residue predictions. There it was again—a pattern. The puya was not merely descriptive. It was *prescriptive*. “These aren’t metaphors,” he said aloud, voice echoing faintly. “They’re instructions.” He enlarged a segment corresponding to the moment Keibukeioiba knelt beneath the old fig tree. The vibrational profile embedded in the syllabic spacing suggested rhythmic modulation—precise intervals, repeating sequences.

Music.

No—*frequency control*.

Chingsanglakpa's heart accelerated, not with excitement but with dread. He had felt this before, at Harvard, when an experiment crossed from hypothesis into inevitability. He pulled up another dataset: soil samples collected—illegally, discreetly—from a protected forest zone in southern Manipur. Officially, the area was marked as ecologically

dormant. Unproductive. The soil told a different story. Carbon-dating placed certain organic compounds at over seven centuries old, yet their cellular integrity was impossible. Proteins preserved beyond decay, membranes folded in configurations resembling suspended animation.

And DNA.

Not tiger.

Not human.

But both—interleaved.

Chingsanglakpa lowered himself into his chair, suddenly aware of the hour, the isolation, the implications. Option A, as he had labelled it in his private notes, had always been theoretical—a convergence of epigenetics, chimeric potential, and environmental stasis.

But theory did not account for *intent*. Someone or something had designed this. The forest, the puya suggested, was not merely a setting but a *biological apparatus*. He summoned the lab's core system. "Initiate resonance simulation. Overlay puya frequency set alpha."

A soft chime acknowledged the command. The air pressure shifted subtly as acoustic dampeners recalibrated. On-screen, waveforms blossomed like living things. As the frequencies aligned, a third pattern emerged—previously invisible. Chingsanglakpa's breath caught. It was a standing wave, impossibly stable, embedded within the biological data. A quantum-coherent state maintained not by machinery, but by *environmental recursion*—soil, root, moisture, microbial exchange. A living lock.

"He wasn't buried," Chingsanglakpa whispered. "He was stored."

The puya's final lines pulsed faintly on the display, characters shimmering as if resisting translation.

Grief anchored him.

The forest held him.

When the wound of the world deepens, the sleeper will breathe.

Unrest. That was the key. Keibukeioiba's soul, if the term could be permitted in scientific discourse, had not resolved. Emotional trauma—heartbreak—had triggered a biological cascade. Stress-induced epigenetic activation, amplified by a unique chimeric genome, catalysed a transition into forest-mediated stasis. Chingsanglakpa felt the weight of it settle over him. This was not a resurrection in the religious sense. It was interruption.

The lab lights dimmed automatically as the storm outside intensified. Thunder rolled low, resonant—too resonant. His instruments flickered, then stabilised. He stood abruptly. “No,” he said, scanning the room. “That frequency isn’t coming from the speakers.” The resonance was environmental. The soil samples—contained within a sealed biocapsule at the lab’s centre—were responding.

Sensors lit up in rapid succession.

Cellular activity: increasing.

Quantum coherence: stabilising.

Metabolic indicators: impossible.

Chingsanglakpa's training screamed at him to shut it down. Every ethical protocol he had ever signed demanded caution. But another voice—older, quieter—spoke from somewhere beneath the equations.

You did not come this far to look away.

He initiated the final sequence, hands trembling despite himself. “Begin Phase Keibu.” The lab’s floor plates separated silently, revealing the biogenic chamber below—a construct of his own design, grown rather than built. Root-like conduits fed nutrient matrices calibrated to mimic forest loam. Above it, a lattice of quantum field stabilizers hummed into coherence. “This is madness,” he said, and meant *history* as much as himself. The puya frequencies intensified, now paired with

bioelectric pulses derived from the preserved genome. The standing wave locked in place.

Then—

A heartbeat. Not audible, but measurable. A rhythmic fluctuation in the quantum field, slow and heavy. Chingsanglakpa's vision blurred. "Tissue differentiation commencing," the system intoned. "Chimeric phenotype stabilising." The chamber's surface shifted. Soil parted—not violently, but with the inevitability of something long delayed.

A hand emerged.

Not fully human. Not fully tiger.

Clawed fingers flexed, trembling, as if remembering gravity. Chingsanglakpa staggered back, mind racing even as awe threatened to unmake him. This was beyond publication, beyond Nobel committees, beyond law. This was consequence. The figure rose incrementally, drawn upward by forces older than language and newer than physics. Fur patterned with faint bioluminescence traced musculature shaped by centuries of waiting. A chest expanded—and contracted.

Air rushed in.

Keibukeioiba breathed.

The eyes opened last.

They were not feral.

They were not calm.

They were *unrest* given form.

A sound escaped his throat—not a roar, not a word—but something between grief and awakening. The quantum stabilisers strained, lights dimming as if in reverence or fear. Chingsanglakpa sank to his knees. "I didn't create you," he said hoarsely, voice breaking the lab's stunned silence. "I only remembered you." Keibukeioiba's gaze fixed on him,

ancient sorrow flickering beneath instinctive assessment. The forest, the puya, the centuries—they moved within him still. And somewhere deep in that resurrected body, heartbreak remained unresolved.

Outside, the storm reached its crescendo.

Across the city, sensors failed.

Animals stirred.

Roots shifted beneath concrete.

History, interrupted once, had resumed.

Chapter 2

The Night the Tiger Remembered

Night did not arrive gently, but it fell heavy, sudden—like a memory long suppressed finally breaking its restraint. Keibukeioiba stood at the threshold of the laboratory, body coiled between instinct and confusion. The sterile air stung his lungs. Light—too sharp, too cold—scraped against senses shaped by leaf-shadow and moon-glow. Every sound fractured into meanings: the hum of power lines like trapped insects, the distant city breathing in restless intervals, the fear-sweat of the man kneeling before him. Dr. Chingsanglakpa did not rise. He knew enough biology—and enough myth—to understand that sudden dominance would be read as threat. “Listen,” he said softly, voice modulated through a quantum-feedback collar resting against his own throat, subtly synchronising with the room’s resonant field. “The night is not your enemy.” The tiger-man did not answer. Instead, memory struck.

The River

Cold water.

Moonlit current.

A clay pitcher pressed into his hands.

He saw it again with unbearable clarity. Thabaton stood by the riverbank, hair loose, eyes too calm. The cicadas had gone silent, as if the world itself was holding its breath. “Fetch water,” she had said, smiling—not cruelly, but carefully. “From the bend where the river

deepens.” He remembered how proud he had felt then. Trusted. Needed. How his claws had flexed eagerly around the pitcher’s neck. He had not seen the hole. Not until the water slipped away—again and again—vanishing faster than it could be gathered. He had laughed at first. Then frowned. Then felt the first tremor of unease. When he finally turned back, the riverbank was empty.

No footprints.

No call carried on the wind.

Only the night, thick with understanding.

She had bought time.

Time to flee.

The forest had watched. The river had said nothing.

And something inside him—something human—had cracked without sound.

Keibukeioiba’s chest heaved. A low sound rumbled upward, not quite a growl, not quite grief. The lab’s quantum stabilizers spiked violently. Chingsanglakpa reacted instantly. “Engaging harmonic dampening,” he commanded. Invisible waves flooded the chamber, tuned not to suppress but to *mirror*—a technique he had developed during his postdoctoral work, then abandoned as “ethically ambiguous.” The system did not cage the mind; it offered it a rhythm it recognised. Simultaneously, he began to chant. Not loudly. Not perfectly. But correctly. From the puya.

O one who walks with striped shadow,

your rage is not your name.

Your grief is not your end.

The words were old. Older than fear. They carried cadence, not meaning alone. Keibukeioiba’s head snapped toward him. For the first time since waking, his eyes focused—not on threat, but on *recognition*.

“You remember,” the tiger-man said. His voice was wrong for the room—too deep, layered with echoes as if multiple throats spoke together. The stabilisers groaned.

Chingsanglakpa swallowed. “Yes.” A step forward. The floor creaked.

“She did not look back,” Keibukeioiba continued, each word dragged from centuries of compression. “I waited. I believed the water would stay if I tried again.” The lab’s lights dimmed further. Outside, dogs howled in distant confusion.

“I knelt,” he said. “I asked the forest to make me forget.”

Silence fell—not empty, but listening.

Chingsanglakpa lowered his gaze. “It did not.”

“No,” Keibukeioiba agreed. “It kept me.”

Another step. The air grew warmer, charged.

“I wish to go home,” the tiger-man said.

Chingsanglakpa looked up sharply. “Home?”

“My abode,” Keibukeioiba replied. “The Tokpa Khul - the tiger village. Beneath the slopes of Mount Laimaton.”

The name struck the room like a fault line. Chingsanglakpa had mapped it. The range was officially uninhabited—classified as unstable terrain, unsuitable for development. *Unproductive land*, the reports said. He opened his mouth to caution, to reason, to delay—

The windows shattered inward.

Not from impact, but pressure.

Keibukeioiba moved.

Not toward the man. Toward the night.

The moment his foot touched open ground, the quantum field collapsed into noise. Sensors across the city screamed.

At the Watch Tower — Manipur Police Surveillance Grid, an officer said, leaning toward the console, “Sir—thermal spike”. “Non-drone. Non-human.” The infrared feed bloomed with impossible heat signatures—tall, asymmetrical, moving far too fast across uneven terrain. “Enhance,” the commander ordered. The image sharpened. Stripes. “Alert command,” he said grimly. “We have a Class-Unknown anomaly heading toward the hills.” The system tagged the trajectory automatically. Manipur Police protocols activated—drones deploying, satellites pivoting. Too late. On the screen, the figure paused at the edge of the forest, half-turned—as if sensing pursuit. For a fraction of a second, the infrared camera caught the outline clearly. Then the hills swallowed him. The signal fractured. Heat signatures scattered into a thousand false positives—boar, deer, wind-warmed stone. “Target lost,” the officer whispered.

High above, beneath cloud and moon, Keibukeioiba ran. Not fleeing. Returning. Behind him, the city glowed—loud, intrusive, unfamiliar. Ahead, the mountains waited, patient as they had always been.

The forest opened its arms.

And the tiger did not vanish this time.

He *remembered*.

Chapter 3

The Emergence of the Guardian

Night in the twenty-second century was not dark. Keibukeioiba realised this within moments of leaving the laboratory compound, though “moments” themselves felt unreliable. Time no longer flowed as it once had. It fractured. It folded. Sounds arrived before their sources. Smells lingered long after their origins vanished. The forest, which once regulated his senses with patient rhythm, had been torn apart by light, metal, and noise. He crouched on a ridge overlooking the outskirts of Imphal, rain sliding off his fur in thin streams. Below him, the city glowed—not with the soft defiance of fireflies or oil lamps, but with a relentless brilliance that pressed upward, staining the sky itself. Streetlights burned without flicker. Vehicles hissed and roared, leaving behind trails of heat that confused his vision. Even the clouds reflected light now, as though the heavens had been conscripted into human order.

Keibukeioiba closed his eyes. The darkness behind his eyelids was the only place that still resembled night. When he opened them again, the forest edge looked wounded—trees trimmed back into obedient lines, undergrowth cleared, paths hardened into roads. The land smelled wrong. Not poisoned. But disciplined like an animal trained to suppress instinct. He inhaled slowly, sorting the scents. Wet earth remained, faint but present. Old leaves decayed beneath newer growth. Somewhere nearby, a creek still followed its ancient course,

stubbornly ignoring human boundaries. But layered atop everything else were the smells of oil, ozone, synthetic polymers, and fear. Fear was the strongest. It leaked from houses, clung to walls, pooled around intersections where humans gathered in groups as if proximity itself might protect them.

Keibukeioiba moved. Not running—yet. He tested the ground with careful steps, adjusting to textures that had not existed in his time. Concrete bit back against his claws. Metal surfaces carried vibrations like trapped insects. He avoided open spaces instinctively, skirting shadows, following what remained of tree lines and drainage channels. Above him, something hummed. He froze. The sound was insect-like but too steady, too intentional. It moved against the wind. A *drone*. Keibukeioiba flattened against the slope, pressing himself into the mud and wet grass. He controlled his breathing, slowing his heart until even his heat signature dulled. The drone passed overhead, a red eye blinking as it scanned. For a moment, he felt a strange, intrusive sensation—as though something were trying to *see* him not with eyes, but with mathematics. The drone moved on. Keibukeioiba exhaled.

In the silence that followed, memory surged.

The river.

Cold water slipping through his fingers.

The clay pitcher, warm from Thabaton's hands.

The slow realisation that something was wrong.

Keibukeioiba's muscles tensed as if preparing to strike an enemy that was no longer there. He shook his head violently, as though that might dislodge the memory. But memories did not behave like enemies. They did not retreat when challenged. They waited, patient, until the mind weakened. He moved again, faster now. Each step triggered flashes—overlapping, unbidden.

Thabaton kneeling by the river, her braid brushing her shoulder.

Thabaton laughing softly when he struggled to pronounce certain human words.

Thabaton standing behind her brothers, eyes pleading even as her body remained still.

Her voice returned to him, not as sound but as pressure behind the eyes.

Some things must choose.

Keibukeioiba stopped abruptly at the edge of a partially wooded ravine. His claws dug into the soil as he leaned forward, breath rasping. For centuries, the forest had held him in silence, compressing grief into something manageable. Now, released too quickly into a world that no longer resembled his own, the grief returned without restraint. He struck the ground once—hard. The earth absorbed the blow, but the shock rippled outward, dislodging stones and startling a cluster of birds into flight. Their sudden movement sent another jolt through his senses. He crouched lower, forcing himself to remain still until the night settled again. “You ran,” he whispered to the memory of Thabaton. “You chose.” The words felt unfair even as he spoke them. He knew the weight of choosing between love and survival. He had lived his entire life within that tension. Still, knowing did not dull the pain.

A sudden sound snapped him back—human voices, nearby. Keibukeioiba shifted position, peering through foliage toward a narrow road below. Two men stood beside a stalled vehicle, arguing. Their voices were sharp, clipped, full of irritation.

“—told you the sensor’s been acting weird all night.”

“Everything’s acting weird. Ever since that thing showed up.”

Keibukeioiba’s ears flattened.

“That thing,” one of the men continued. “They say it’s not an animal. Not exactly.”

“Then what is it?”

A pause.

“Does it matter?”

Keibukeioiba withdrew silently, retreating deeper into cover. The words struck harder than he expected. *Does it matter?* In his time, the answer had always been yes. Names mattered. Lineage mattered. The forest named him, and that naming carried obligation. Now, he was an anomaly—something to be detected, categorised, eliminated if necessary. He moved uphill, toward darker ground. As the night stretched on, his disorientation deepened. Artificial sounds overlapped with natural ones, blurring boundaries his senses relied upon. Helicopters thudded in the distance, their rhythms echoing thunder without rain. Screens glowed behind windows, casting human faces in pale blue light that made them look ghostlike. At one point, he passed close enough to a building to see his reflection in glass. He stopped. The image startled him—not because it was unfamiliar, but because it was *too* familiar. The tiger stripes. The man’s eyes. The fusion that neither time nor burial had undone. He raised a claw slowly, watching the reflection mimic him. “So, I remain,” he murmured. “Unchanged.” But even as he said it, he knew it was not true. Something had shifted. The forest’s silence no longer cushioned his thoughts. The world pressed in from all sides, demanding response. Keibukeioiba climbed higher, following instinct rather than reason. Eventually, the city’s glow diminished behind him, replaced by a thinner darkness broken only by distant lights. He reached a narrow ridge where the wind swept freely, carrying scents from miles away.

There—faint but unmistakable—Tokpa Khul. The village smelled different now, but beneath layers of modernity, the old scents lingered: cooking rice, human sweat, the metallic tang of tools, the subtle anxiety of communal living. His chest tightened. He descended carefully. As he neared the outskirts, he slowed, scanning for movement. Houses stood where none had stood before—solid,

angular, indifferent to the forest's contours. Paths had hardened into roads. Boundaries were enforced with fences rather than understanding. Keibukeioiba lingered at the edge, watching. Humans moved within their dwellings, unaware of him yet surrounded by his attention. Children laughed somewhere. A dog barked, then fell silent. He searched faces, postures, silhouettes. Thabaton was not among them. The realisation struck him not as a sudden blow, but as an accumulation—a quiet certainty that settled into his bones. She was not here. Or if she was, she no longer existed in the way he remembered.

A sound drifted upward on the wind—faint, irregular, wrong. Keibukeioiba tilted his head, ears swivelling to isolate it. Human voices carried poorly in the mountains, but fear sharpened sound. He caught fragments: raised voices, a cry abruptly cut short, the metallic clatter of something heavy being dragged. He froze. The forest around him tightened, alert. This was not the measured noise of villagers or soldiers. This was predation. Keibukeioiba's first instinct was to withdraw. Not out of fear, but calculation. He had already drawn attention. Drones hunted the skies. Soldiers tested the forest's patience. Any intervention would deepen the disturbance. Yet the sound came again—a woman's voice this time, sharp with panic, unmistakable.

Keibukeioiba closed his eyes. The image of Thabaton rose unbidden: her breath hitching when startled, her voice strained when fear brushed too close. Memory and instinct aligned with dangerous clarity. He turned toward the sound. The path downward was steep and uneven, forcing him to slow despite urgency. He moved silently, controlling each descent, listening as the voices grew clearer. By the time he reached the edge of the clearing, the scene had already arranged itself into something familiar and ugly. A vehicle stood idling under portable lights, its engine growling impatiently. Three men argued near its rear, their agitation thinly veiled by bravado. A fourth paced, checking his surroundings too often to be calm. Near the

vehicle's open door, a young woman struggled against restraints, her breath coming in ragged bursts as she tried—and failed—to break free. Keibukeioiba crouched at the tree line, taking it all in. This was not chaos. It was practised cruelty. The men spoke in hurried tones, their words overlapping.

“—we don't have much time.”

“They won't trace us up here.”

“Keep her quiet!”

The woman cried out again as one of them shoved her roughly. The sound cut through Keibukeioiba with surgical precision. Something inside him shifted. Not rage—yet. Something colder. Clearer. The forest did not rush him. It waited. Keibukeioiba stepped forward. The lights caught him immediately. For a heartbeat, no one moved. The men stared, their expressions scrambling to categorise what stood before them. Man? Animal? Costume? Their minds groped for precedent and found none. One of them laughed—a brittle, reflexive sound. “What the hell is that?” Keibukeioiba did not answer. The woman saw him then. Her eyes widened—not with hope, but with the instinctive terror humans reserved for the unknown.

The first gunshot came too fast. The crack split the night, echoing off the rock face. The bullet struck Keibukeioiba's chest and flattened, clinking harmlessly to the ground. For a fraction of a second, even Keibukeioiba felt surprise—not at the pain, but at its absence. The men stared. Another fired. Then another. Bullets sparked against his skin, deflecting at angles that sent fragments skittering across stone. The air filled with acrid smoke and shouted curses. Keibukeioiba moved. He closed the distance between himself and the nearest man in a single bound, striking with the blunt edge of his forearm. The man flew backward, crashing into the vehicle and collapsing in a heap. Keibukeioiba pivoted, sweeping the legs out from under another attacker, claws raking deliberately across muscle rather than throat.

Blue-black marks bloomed instantly where his claws passed—deep, unmistakable, burning with a strange, residual heat. The third man turned to run. Keibukeioiba caught him by the collar and lifted him effortlessly off the ground. The man’s weapon clattered away uselessly as he kicked and gasped.

“Please,” he babbled. “Please—don’t kill me!”

Keibukeioiba studied his face. The fear there was real, raw. Human.

“I am not death,” he said quietly. “Run.”

He released the man, who fell, scrambled, and vanished into the darkness without a backward glance.

The clearing fell silent. The woman stared at Keibukeioiba, her terror now tangled with confusion. Her breathing slowed slightly, though her body remained rigid. “It’s... over,” Keibukeioiba said, keeping his voice low. He knelt, careful to lower his height, to make himself less overwhelming. “You are safe.” Her eyes fluttered, fighting consciousness. The night had taken too much from her already. She fainted. Keibukeioiba exhaled slowly, the tension draining from his limbs. He approached her with care, freeing her from restraints with precise movements. Human skin was fragile; he reminded himself of this constantly. He lifted her gently. The forest accepted them both without comment.

The cave lay not far from the clearing, tucked behind a cascade of rock and ivy that shielded it from casual discovery. Keibukeioiba had used it once before, long ago—a temporary shelter during storms, nothing more. Now it served a different purpose. He laid the woman on a bed of leaves and moss, arranging her limbs carefully. He fetched water from a nearby stream, washing dirt and blood from her face with deliberate gentleness. As he worked, memory intruded again. Thabaton sleeping beneath the trees, her breath even, her trust unguarded. Keibukeioiba’s hands stilled. “She is not you,” he murmured to the memory. “I know.” Yet the act of care felt the same.

Protection did not differentiate between faces. The woman stirred slightly, her breathing evening out. Satisfied she would recover, Keibukeioiba stepped back, retreating into shadow. He remained there until the first hint of dawn crept into the cave, turning darkness into softer shades of gray. Only then did he lift her again.

At the edge of Tokpa Khul, Keibukeioiba placed the woman beneath a pine tree near a footpath that villagers used at first light. He arranged her so she would be visible quickly, her injuries obvious but not fatal. He stepped back, watching. Soon, a door opened. A voice called out. More voices followed. Panic rose, then urgency. Someone ran for help. Keibukeioiba retreated as sirens approached, melting back into the forest just as lights flared and vehicles arrived. From a ridge above, he watched the village respond—fear, relief, confusion weaving together in familiar human patterns. The woman was lifted onto a stretcher, her face pale but alive. He turned away before anyone looked too closely at the trees. He sat beneath a tree overlooking the basin, muscles finally at rest, and considered what he had done. He had not acted to find Thabaton. He had acted to prevent harm. The distinction mattered. He pressed a claw into the soil, feeling the forest's steady presence beneath him. "I did not choose this," he said softly. "But it has chosen me." The forest did not answer—but it did not withdraw.

As dusk fell, Keibukeioiba rose and moved deeper into the high-altitude forest of Mount Laimaton, toward the place that had always been his refuge. He knew, with a clarity that left no room for doubt, that this act would not be forgotten. The world had seen him now. Not as a memory. Not as a myth. But as something that acted. And that, he sensed, would change everything.

And in a laboratory far away, Dr. Chingsanglakpa stared at a screen filled with fluctuating data, his unease deepening. The night had not ended. It had merely changed form.

Chapter 4

Being Named a Demon

The story broke before dawn. It did not arrive as truth; it arrived as fragments—blurred footage, blood-streaked ground, claw marks photographed from multiple angles, dented bullets held between gloved fingers like relics. Newsfeeds filled rapidly, competing not for accuracy but for dominance. Each channel named the thing differently, though the meaning was the same.

Demon.

Beast.

Bulletproof mutant.

Unknown bio-entity.

In a government hospital on the outskirts of Imphal, the men who had survived the encounter lay in separate rooms under armed watch. Their bodies bore long, dark scars where Keibukeioiba's claws had passed—marks that no surgeon could explain. The flesh beneath was bruised as if struck by intense pressure, yet there was no corresponding tissue collapse, no pattern that matched known weapons. One of the men screamed whenever someone in uniform entered his room.

"They don't understand," he babbled to anyone who would listen. "It wasn't an animal. It *looked* at us. Like we were already dead."

A police officer leaned closer, voice calm. "Describe it again."

The man shook violently. “Bullets didn’t work. They *bounced*. It didn’t roar like in movies. It spoke. It said—” He swallowed hard. “It said it wasn’t death.”

His testimony spread quickly, stripped of context, sharpened by fear.

In another wing of the hospital, the rescued woman lay under sedation. When she woke, doctors asked her the same questions. Her answers unsettled them.

“He didn’t hurt me,” she said slowly, choosing each word with care. “He stopped them. That’s all.”

“But he killed them?” a nurse pressed.

“No,” the woman replied. “He could have. He didn’t.”

Her voice faltered. “He carried me. Like... like I was something precious.”

Her account circulated more slowly, drowned beneath louder voices. Mercy did not travel as fast as terror.

In a secure conference room in Imphal, the Chief Minister stared at the screen in front of him, jaw clenched. Advisors filled the room—intelligence, military, media handlers—each speaking in overlapping urgency.

“This is already international,” one said. “The footage is everywhere.”

“Public fear is escalating,” another added. “People are demanding action.”

A senior police official cleared his throat. “We’ve confirmed infrared movement in the Laimaton range. The entity knows the terrain. Exceptionally well.”

The Chief Minister rubbed his temples. “And Dr. Chingsanglakpa?”

A brief pause.

“He’s been summoned.”

Chingsanglakpa stood alone in the waiting corridor outside the conference room, hands clasped behind his back. He had not slept. His mind replayed data patterns obsessively—movement trajectories, biometric readings, harmonic spikes. Keibukeioiba's presence left traces that defied conventional explanation, not chaotic but *coherent*. That frightened him more than violence ever could. When the doors opened, he entered a room thick with expectation.

"You brought this upon us," one advisor said immediately.

Chingsanglakpa met the man's gaze without flinching. "I did not release a weapon," he replied. "I awakened a being."

"A being that's attacking civilians," another snapped.

"No," Chingsanglakpa said firmly. "A being that stopped an attack."

Murmurs rippled through the room.

"Intent doesn't matter," the Chief Minister said quietly. "Outcome does."

Chingsanglakpa took a breath. "Then let us speak honestly about outcomes. No fatalities. No structural damage. Controlled force."

"Controlled?" the police official scoffed. "He dented bullets."

"He deflected them," Chingsanglakpa corrected. "There's a difference."

The room fell silent.

"You're saying he's... selective," the Chief Minister said.

"I'm saying he's *ethical*," Chingsanglakpa replied. "By a code older than any of us."

One of the intelligence officers leaned forward. "With respect, Doctor, ethics don't scale. Control does."

Chingsanglakpa felt the weight of isolation settle on him.

“If you hunt him,” he said slowly, “you will teach him fear. Fear escalates.”

“And if we do nothing?” the Chief Minister asked.

“Then you give me time,” Chingsanglakpa said. “To communicate. To understand.”

A senior military advisor shook his head. “We cannot afford uncertainty. Not with global attention.”

The Chief Minister looked at Chingsanglakpa for a long moment.

“You will assist,” he said finally. “You will lead. But understand this—this is no longer academic.”

Chingsanglakpa nodded. “I understand.”

What he did not say was that understanding did not mean agreement.

By afternoon, orders moved faster than people. Five hundred elite soldiers were mobilised—neural-implanted, exoskeleton-assisted, trained for terrain denial and asymmetric engagement. Their equipment arrived in sealed containers bearing Defence Ministry insignia. Drones capable of thermal inversion and sub-canopy tracking were deployed. Satellite coverage tightened. The operation had a name before it had a plan. Keibukeioiba did not know this. He felt the change anyway.

High on Mount Laimaton, within the dense forest of his old abode, Keibukeioiba sensed the tightening net long before machines intruded. The forest whispered of disturbance—roots strained, birds scattered, insects stilled unnaturally. The land itself braced. He crouched within a hollow formed by massive roots, watching distant lights sweep across lower slopes. He had chosen this place deliberately. Here, the forest remembered him most clearly. “You cannot hide forever,” he murmured to himself. “Nor should you.” His thoughts drifted back to the woman he had rescued—not her face, but her stillness, her fragile trust as she lost consciousness in his arms. That

trust lingered. He rose and moved deeper into cover, preparing—not to flee, but to endure.

Back in Imphal, Chingsanglakpa stood alone again, watching the sun sink behind the hills. He felt as though he was watching a tide pull away from shore, exposing things better left submerged. “I will lead,” he said aloud, though no one was there to hear him. “And without my command, no one strikes.” The words echoed hollowly.

Above the forest, helicopters roared.

Below, the earth waited.

Keibukeioiba lifted his head, sensing movement converging.

The night would not pass quietly.

Chapter 5

The Domain of the Serpent

The world learned how to move faster than fear. What had begun as a localised incident—grainy footage, half-formed narratives—now metastasised into something larger, sharper, and far more dangerous. Foreign intelligence agencies requested data. Military attachés spoke in careful euphemisms. Satellites were retasked. Borders, once irrelevant to myth, suddenly mattered again. Keibukeioiba sensed none of this directly. What he felt instead was pressure. It arrived as a tightening of the air, a subtle compression of the forest’s breath. The birds scattered more readily now. Even insects paused mid-song when machines passed overhead. The land itself seemed to lean away from the intrusion, as though instinctively attempting to make itself smaller.

Keibukeioiba stood high on the Laimaton ridge, watching lights creep upward from the valleys below. They moved in patterns too deliberate to be mistaken for chance. Drones hovered at fixed intervals, their hum resonating faintly against the rock face. Further down, columns of soldiers advanced with mechanical precision, their exoskeletons amplifying footsteps that would otherwise have vanished into leaf and soil. They had learned. He shifted his stance, scanning the terrain. Laimaton remained defensible—dense forest, uneven ground, countless hidden paths—but the numbers arrayed against him were unlike anything he had faced before. This was not a mob of fearful villagers. This was a coordinated force, trained to deny terrain rather

than respect it. The forest stirred restlessly. “Easy,” Keibukeioiba murmured, placing a clawed hand against the trunk of a nearby tree. “Not yet.” He had no intention of becoming a weapon for either side. As the net tightened, he moved—not downhill toward Tokpa Khul, not upward into the deepest refuge, but laterally, following a route known only to those who had walked the mountain long before maps existed. The Leimatak River basin waited below.

The first confrontation came sooner than expected. A drone dipped too low, its sensors locking onto his heat signature. Keibukeioiba reacted instantly, leaping sideways into dense foliage. The machine adjusted, tracking smoothly. A sharp pulse followed—non-lethal, but disruptive. The air around him crackled unpleasantly, sending a wave of numbness through his limbs. Keibukeioiba snarled, muscles coiling. He could tear the drone from the sky easily. He could dismantle the soldiers as he had the kidnappers. The forest offered him a hundred ambushes. But every strike would confirm the story they were already telling. Keibukeioiba surged forward, bounding through trees with explosive speed. Branches shattered behind him, leaves spiralling as he moved. The drones struggled to keep pace, recalibrating frantically as he vanished into thicker cover. Ahead, the land dropped sharply.

The suspension bridge emerged from the mist like a memory given form. Built by Japanese troops during WWII whose reasons had long since decayed into abstraction, the bridge spanned the gorge in a delicate arc of rusted cables and weathered planks. The forest had partially reclaimed it—vines wrapping steel, moss cushioning wood—but it still held.

Keibukeioiba slowed only briefly before stepping onto it. The bridge swayed under his weight, protesting but not failing. Below, the Leimatak River churned, swollen by recent rains, its surface broken into chaotic reflections. Halfway across, he paused. The forest on the far side felt different—older, heavier, imbued with a presence that dwarfed even his own. This was not merely land. It was *domain*. Behind

him, the drones hesitated. Keibukeioiba crossed fully and disappeared into the trees just as soldiers reached the near end of the bridge. They stopped. Not from lack of orders, but from instinct. Something about the far side repelled them.

The Leimatak basin breathed differently. Here, the forest was darker, denser, the canopy interwoven so tightly that daylight arrived only in fractured shafts. The air carried a damp, mineral weight that pressed against the skin. Water flowed everywhere—not in obvious streams alone, but beneath the soil, through rock, whispering constantly. Keibukeioiba descended slowly, each step deliberate. *This was Lord Pakhangba's dwelling.* He had come here once before, long ago, following a wound that refused to heal. In those days, he had been reckless, driven by anger and confusion. Now, he came with humility. He stopped at the river's edge and knelt. "Ebudhou Pakhangba," he said softly. "Horned one. Guardian of the deep paths. I ask passage." The water stilled. Not completely—rivers never truly stopped—but enough to mark attention. A low vibration pulsed through the basin, felt more than heard. Keibukeioiba bowed his head. "I do not bring war," he continued. "Nor do I seek refuge from consequence. I seek only to pass without breaking what must endure." The river responded with a slow surge, its surface rising and falling as though something vast shifted beneath. Keibukeioiba remained still until the pressure eased. Only then did he rise and move deeper into the basin.

On the ridge above, confusion spread through the ranks. Thermal readings dropped abruptly at the gorge's far edge. Drones malfunctioned inexplicably, their feeds dissolving into static when pointed toward the basin. Communications faltered, forcing soldiers to rely on line-of-sight signals and old-fashioned coordination.

"What's happening?" a commander snapped.

"Sensor blackout," an officer replied. "Localised. We're blind beyond the river."

Orders crackled over comms.

“Hold position.”

None argued.

Chingsanglakpa arrived at the forward command post just as tension peaked. He took in the scene at a glance—troops arrayed for engagement, commanders debating escalation, machines recalibrating fruitlessly. His jaw tightened.

“He’s entered the basin,” he said.

Several heads turned.

“You know that how?” the Chief Minister demanded.

“Because the sensors failed,” Chingsanglakpa replied. “And because he would choose that path.”

A military advisor frowned. “You’re suggesting the terrain itself is interfering?”

“I’m suggesting,” Chingsanglakpa said carefully, “that you’ve stepped into someone else’s jurisdiction.”

The room stilled.

“You mean mythology,” someone scoffed.

“I mean precedent,” Chingsanglakpa countered. “Long-standing, well-documented precedent.”

He stepped forward. “If you proceed, you will not just provoke him. You will provoke *the land*.”

The Chief Minister studied him. “Then what do you propose?”

Chingsanglakpa did not hesitate. “I go alone.”

Murmurs erupted.

“You’ll be killed,” an officer snapped.

“No,” Chingsanglakpa said. “He trusts me.”

“That’s not a strategy.”

“It’s the only one that doesn’t end in blood.”

After a long pause, reluctant approval came. Chingsanglakpa took a breath, steadying himself, and crossed the bridge. The basin received him poorly. Not with hostility, but with indifference. The forest closed around him, paths narrowing, shadows deepening. Each step felt heavier, as though the ground tested his intent. Chingsanglakpa stopped at the river’s edge and began to chant. The words were old, older than the manuscripts that preserved them. He spoke in the cadence of *the Puya*, his voice low and steady, shaping sound rather than volume.

“O bearer of paths unseen,” he intoned, “we enter with humility.”

The water rippled.

Keibukeioiba emerged from shadow moments later, eyes glowing faintly in the filtered light.

“You should not be here,” he said.

Chingsanglakpa exhaled in relief. “Neither should they.”

Keibukeioiba glanced toward the far bank, where faint lights flickered uncertainly. “They will not stop.”

“They will,” Chingsanglakpa said. “If you give them reason.”

Keibukeioiba studied him. “You ask me to kneel.”

“I ask you to choose,” Chingsanglakpa replied. “Surrender without submission.”

Silence stretched.

The river surged once more, a reminder of a watching presence.

Keibukeioiba closed his eyes.

“I will not be hunted,” he said. “Nor will I slaughter those who fear me.”

Chingsanglakpa nodded. “Then come willingly.”

Keibukeioiba straightened slowly. He stepped forward and knelt. The moment reverberated outward—not as sound, but as consequence. Across the gorge, sensors flickered back to life. Orders halted mid-transmission. The hunt ended without a single shot being fired.

Keibukeioiba was escorted—not dragged—across the bridge, through ranks of silent soldiers who watched him with expressions ranging from awe to unease. Chingsanglakpa walked beside him.

“You will regret this,” Keibukeioiba said quietly.

Chingsanglakpa nodded. “Probably.”

“But I will keep my word,” he added. “I will find her in one month.”

Keibukeioiba’s gaze softened, just enough.

“That promise binds you now,” he said. “More tightly than any fence.”

As the convoy moved away from the basin, the river resumed its normal flow. Lord Pakhangba withdrew, unseen but not uninvolved. The forest remembered who had passed through with respect.

And far beyond Manipur, others marked the data spike, the anomaly resolved without violence. They began to plan.

Chapter 6

Being Held

The enclosure at Leimakhong did not look like a prison. That, Chingsanglakpa would later realise, was its first deception. From a distance, it resembled a research habitat—low-profile structures integrated into the terrain, surrounded by vegetation carefully cultivated to appear natural. The perimeter fence shimmered faintly in the humid air, its presence revealed only when light struck it at the right angle. Beyond it, forest still stood, birds still nested, insects still sang. Everything suggested continuity. Inside, control reigned absolute. Keibukeioiba sensed the boundary long before he reached it. The air tasted different near the fence, charged with a subtle vibration that set his fur on edge. He slowed, nostrils flaring as he tested the invisible barrier. It was not pain that warned him away, but resistance—an unnatural firmness pressing back against his presence. He stopped.

Beyond the barrier stood Chingsanglakpa. The doctor looked smaller than Keibukeioiba remembered from their first encounter, his frame dwarfed by the equipment arranged around him. Yet his posture was steady, his gaze unwavering. “Do not come closer,” Chingsanglakpa said, raising a hand—not in command, but in caution. “It will hurt you.” Keibukeioiba studied him silently. Behind the doctor, soldiers stood in disciplined formation, exoskeletons humming softly, weapons lowered but ready. Drones hovered overhead like patient insects, their sensors tracking every shift in Keibukeioiba’s stance.

"You brought many," Keibukeioiba said.

Chingsanglakpa nodded. "Because they are afraid."

Keibukeioiba's tail flicked once, irritation restrained. "Fear spreads faster than fire."

"Yes," Chingsanglakpa agreed quietly. "That is why I am here."

They regarded one another across the invisible divide, two figures bound by an understanding no one else present shared.

"You promised," Keibukeioiba said. "To help me find her."

"I did," Chingsanglakpa replied. "And I will. But not if this becomes a war."

Keibukeioiba glanced toward the soldiers. Their heartbeats thudded loudly in his ears, each one a drumbeat of tension. He could feel the forest behind him, restless, ready to respond if he chose violence.

"If I enter," he said slowly, "I do not leave."

Chingsanglakpa swallowed. "Not yet."

The honesty of the answer hung heavy between them.

"And if I refuse?" Keibukeioiba asked.

Chingsanglakpa closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, there was no evasion in his gaze.

"Then someone will make a mistake," he said. "And you will teach them why fear is earned."

Keibukeioiba considered this. He had spent centuries absorbed in patience. Another act of waiting did not frighten him.

"Bring the woman," he said suddenly.

Chingsanglakpa stiffened. "What woman?"

"The one I saved," Keibukeioiba replied. "Her presence steadies me."

A murmur rippled through the soldiers. The request unsettled them more than a threat would have. “I can arrange that,” Chingsanglakpa said carefully. “But only if you come willingly.”

Keibukeioiba took a step forward. The barrier flared—visible now as a lattice of pale energy. It hummed, responding to his proximity. He stopped at its edge, lifting a clawed hand. The energy field resisted him gently at first, then firmly. It did not burn. It did not shock. It *held*. Keibukeioiba exhaled. “So, this is how you do it now,” he murmured. “You hold the forest at arm’s length.” Chingsanglakpa did not respond. Keibukeioiba stepped fully into the enclosure. The field sealed behind him with a sound like a breath being released.

The first hours passed in silence. Keibukeioiba stood near the centre of the enclosure, senses stretched outward, cataloging every anomaly. The soil beneath his feet was real—but engineered. The trees were living—but monitored. Even the air carried a faint, metallic undertone, as though filtered through intent. He felt watched from every direction, not with hostility but with calculation. Chingsanglakpa returned alone once the soldiers had withdrawn to the perimeter.

“They will not approach unless necessary,” he said. “I insisted.”

Keibukeioiba did not turn. “They think me an animal.”

“They think you unpredictable,” Chingsanglakpa corrected. “That frightens them more.”

Keibukeioiba’s shoulders rose and fell with a controlled breath. “You have made me smaller.”

Chingsanglakpa winced. “I have kept you alive.”

“Those are not the same,” Keibukeioiba said.

A pause.

“I will not starve you,” Chingsanglakpa said. “Nor deny you water. But there will be rules.”

Keibukeioiba finally faced him. “Rules are stories humans tell themselves to feel safe.”

Chingsanglakpa met his gaze. “And sometimes stories keep us from becoming monsters.”

The word hung between them, heavy with implication.

Night fell. Artificial lights dimmed automatically, simulating dusk. Crickets emerged on schedule, their chirping precise enough to feel rehearsed. Keibukeioiba lay down eventually, curling on the earth despite knowing the ground beneath him was layered with sensors. Sleep did not come easily. Memories pressed in—Thabaton’s voice, the river, the holed pitcher. Each thought circled back to the same absence. He rose again before dawn, restless. That was when the hunger struck—not of the body, but of the spirit. The enclosure denied him the small freedoms he had never consciously named: wandering without direction, listening to the forest choose paths for him, feeling time dissolve. This place held time tightly.

When Chingsanglakpa returned with food—simple, carefully prepared—Keibukeioiba accepted it without comment. He ate slowly, deliberately, reminding himself that survival had never been a negotiation.

“Tell me,” Keibukeioiba said after a long silence, “why you did not kill me when you had the chance.”

Chingsanglakpa looked startled. “That was never an option.”

“Everything is an option,” Keibukeioiba replied. “You chose restraint.”

“Yes,” Chingsanglakpa said. “Because killing you would not erase what you represent.”

“And what is that?” Keibukeioiba asked.

Chingsanglakpa hesitated. “A question.”

Keibukeioiba considered this. “Then ask it.”

Chingsanglakpa took a breath. “What happens when myth refuses to stay dead?”

Keibukeioiba’s gaze drifted toward the treeline beyond the fence. “Then the world must learn to live with it.”

The woman arrived on the third day. She approached the enclosure slowly, escorted but not restrained. Her eyes widened when she saw Keibukeioiba standing within the field, tall and unmistakable. She stopped several meters away.

“You,” she whispered.

Keibukeioiba lowered himself into a crouch, mirroring the posture he had taken in the clearing. “You are safe,” he said.

She swallowed hard. “You saved me.”

“Yes,” he replied simply.

The soldiers tensed, hands hovering near weapons. Chingsanglakpa raised a hand sharply, and they froze.

“Why?” the woman asked. “Why did you help me?”

Keibukeioiba’s answer came without hesitation. “Because someone once ran when she should not have had to.” The woman frowned, not understanding fully—but she nodded. Something shifted then—not dramatically, but enough. Fear loosened its grip. After she left, Keibukeioiba felt the enclosure tighten around him again—not physically, but emotionally. He had been reminded of the world beyond the fence. Chingsanglakpa lingered.

“You see?” the doctor said softly. “Connection changes things.”

Keibukeioiba looked at him steadily. “Do not promise what you cannot deliver.”

Chingsanglakpa’s jaw tightened. “I promised to help you find her.”

“And if you fail?” Keibukeioiba asked. The question cut deeper than accusation. Chingsanglakpa did not answer. That silence would grow heavier with time.

By the end of the week, routines had formed. Keibukeioiba learned the rhythms of the enclosure, the limits of the field, and the patterns of observation. He complied without submission, waited without surrender. The soldiers grew less tense, though none relaxed fully. Chingsanglakpa watched all of it with increasing unease. He had contained Keibukeioiba. He had not contained the consequences. As night settled once more over Leimakhong, Keibukeioiba stood near the fence, gazing toward the unseen forest beyond. “Find her,” he said quietly, not turning. “Or release me.” Chingsanglakpa closed his eyes.

Outside the enclosure, decisions were already being made—decisions that would turn compassion into calculation. And somewhere far beyond Leimakhong, others were watching. Learning.

Chapter 7

The Shape of a Promise

Hope arrived without warning. Keibukeioiba felt it before he understood it, a subtle loosening inside his chest, as though something long compressed had been allowed to expand—just slightly. It unsettled him more than despair ever had. Despair, at least, was honest. It announced itself clearly, asked nothing further. Hope invited expectation, and expectation carried the weight of consequence. He stood near the eastern boundary of the enclosure, watching dawn filter through the engineered canopy. The leaves above were real, living, yet they moved with a precision that betrayed design. Even the birds followed predictable arcs, their flight patterns logged and analysed somewhere beyond sight. Still, dawn was dawn. Keibukeioiba inhaled deeply. The air tasted clean enough. Somewhere beyond the fence, the forest continued without permission, indifferent to observation.

Footsteps approached. Chingsanglakpa entered the enclosure carrying no instruments, no data tablets, no protective gear beyond the faint shimmer of the personal field he wore at all times. That alone marked the visit as different. When he stopped several paces away, he did not speak immediately.

“You did not sleep,” Keibukeioiba said.

Chingsanglakpa managed a thin smile. “Neither did you.”

They stood in silence for a while, listening to the artificial forest wake itself.

“I’ve been reviewing everything,” Chingsanglakpa said at last. “Every oral account. Every fragment of Puya. Every anthropological trace connected to Tokpa Khul and the Laimaton range.”

Keibukeioiba turned to face him fully. “And?”

“And there are... gaps,” Chingsanglakpa said. “Gaps where Thabaton should be.”

Keibukeioiba’s ears flattened slightly—not in anger, but in caution.

“She left,” he said. “That is not a gap. That is a choice.”

“Yes,” Chingsanglakpa agreed. “But choices leave trails. Cultural echoes. Names passed down. Songs altered slightly over generations.” He hesitated. “In this case, there is almost nothing.”

Keibukeioiba’s gaze sharpened. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” Chingsanglakpa replied carefully, “that either Thabaton vanished completely... or someone ensured she would not be remembered.” The words hung between them.

Keibukeioiba felt the familiar tightening in his chest, but this time it was threaded with something else—curiosity, perhaps, or the faintest stirring of anticipation.

“You believe she may still exist,” he said.

“I believe,” Chingsanglakpa replied, “that absence can be manufactured.”

Keibukeioiba stepped closer to the boundary field, testing it lightly with his fingertips. The energy hummed in response, firm but not painful.

“Then find her,” he said. “That was your promise.”

Chingsanglakpa nodded. “I intend to keep it.” The idea did not arrive fully formed. It began as a question Chingsanglakpa refused to ask aloud.

For days, he immersed himself in neural mapping research, reviewing advances in synthetic cognition, memory imprinting, and adaptive learning. He studied breakthroughs he had once dismissed as ethically premature—humanoid interfaces capable of emotional response, neural lattices grown from human stem cells rather than silicon alone. At night, when the laboratory emptied and the forest outside pressed close against glass and steel, he returned to the Puya manuscripts. One verse troubled him more than the others:

*That which is loved returns not always in flesh,
but in form that memory permits.*

Chingsanglakpa read it again and again.

Memory permits.

Not fate.

Not gods.

Memory.

The implication settled heavily in his mind. He did not sleep. Keibukeioiba sensed the shift before it was explained.

Chingsanglakpa’s visits grew longer, quieter. He spoke less of data and more of memory, of perception, of how the mind anchored identity to pattern rather than substance.

“Tell me about her,” he asked one evening.

Keibukeioiba’s eyes narrowed. “You already know the stories.”

“I know what others said,” Chingsanglakpa replied. “I want to know what *you* remember.”

For a long moment, Keibukeioiba said nothing. “Do it,” he said. “If I have Thabaton... nothing else matters.”

The neural interface was not invasive. No needles. No pain. Quantum resonance mapping—developed at Harvard, refined in isolation—allowed memory to be *visualized* without extraction. The brain was not forced to surrender. It was invited to *replay*. Chingsanglakpa activated the system. The enclosure lights dimmed. A low harmonic filled the air, tuned to Keibukeioiba’s unique bio-quantum signature. The chains slackened slightly—an unconscious concession by the algorithms, recognizing cooperation.

“Think of her,” Chingsanglakpa said softly. “The first time.”

Keibukeioiba closed his eyes. The forest breathed. Data flooded in—not as words, but as color, depth, contour. A holographic field bloomed between them, coalescing slowly, reverently.

A face emerged.

Primitive.

Ethnic.

Unadorned.

And devastatingly beautiful.

Thabaton stood there as memory had preserved her—skin warm with sun and riverlight, eyes wide and intelligent, strength coiled beneath gentleness. Her beauty was not ornamental. It was *inevitable*. Chingsanglakpa felt his breath catch. *Damsel of heavenly beauty*, his rational mind supplied uselessly—and recoiled at the inadequacy of the phrase. The projection turned, revealing her form as Keibukeioiba had known it—movement, posture, the way she stood between fear and courage.

Keibukeioiba’s eyes opened. For a heartbeat, he forgot the fence. The chains. The hunger.

“She is here,” he whispered.

Chingsanglakpa nodded. “I see her.”

Keibukeioiba reached out instinctively. The hologram rippled but did not resist.

“You will bring her,” he said—not as a question.

Chingsanglakpa swallowed. “Yes.”

And in that moment, the promise settled on him with crushing clarity.

If I fail... this will not be a security breach. It will be a catastrophe greater than war.

The projection faded. The harmonic died away. The enclosure lights returned. Keibukeioiba straightened, renewed—not calmed, but *anchored*. “Now I will wait,” he said. The authorities moved quickly after that. Food was delivered—raw meat at first, then carefully prepared portions. Water flowed freely. Medical teams monitored from a distance, no longer fearing approach. Communication protocols were simplified.

He spoke.

He listened.

He obeyed boundaries.

Not because he was tamed.

But because he was promised.

Chingsanglakpa watched from behind reinforced glass as Keibukeioiba ate for the first time in days, movements deliberate, almost ceremonial. “You’ve given him hope,” an officer murmured. “That’s control.” Chingsanglakpa did not answer. Hope, he knew, was the most dangerous containment strategy ever invented.

Alone in his quarters, Chingsanglakpa replayed the hologram again and again—studying genealogical markers, facial symmetry, ethnic identifiers. The data suggested lineage continuity. Probability trees branched outward. *She existed*, he told himself. *Or someone like her did.*

He pressed his palms to his eyes. “One month,” he whispered into the dark.

Outside, within the electric boundaries, Keibukeioiba lay still beneath the stars, no longer starving, no longer raging—holding onto a single image that now existed not only in his mind, but in the world.

Thabaton.

And far beyond the fences, destiny recalculated itself.

Chapter 8

Synthetic Thabaton

Dr. Chingsanglakpa did not sleep for three nights framing the possibilities to materialise his promise. *One month.* The number echoed like a countdown to annihilation. On the fourth night, Chingsanglakpa stood before the Authority Council and said the words he had sworn he never would.

“There is one option left.”

Silence followed—not rejection, but anticipation.

“A humanoid,” he continued. “A synthetic Thabaton.”

The Chief Secretary frowned. “A replica?”

“No,” Chingsanglakpa said firmly. “A *being*.”

He activated the holographic projection.

A figure appeared—female, human-shaped, unfinished.

“The brain will be organic,” he said. “A cultivated human neural matrix—ethically sourced, legally sanctioned. Capable of emotion, learning, memory formation. It will be programmed—not controlled—to think, feel, and respond as Thabaton did, based on Keibukeioiba’s memory imprint.”

“And the body?” someone asked.

“Machine,” Chingsanglakpa replied. “Synthetic musculature. Adaptive dermal layers. No biological aging. No decay.”

A pause.

“You are proposing to give a myth a woman who cannot die,” the Defence Secretary said slowly.

“I am proposing,” Chingsanglakpa replied, “to prevent a catastrophe.”

Reluctantly, approval came.

The project was outsourced to a Bangalore-based neuro-robotics giant, **AstraMind Dynamics**, whose facilities already straddled the ethical fault lines of humanity’s future. Chingsanglakpa was invited—not as consultant, but as *custodian*. In the clean rooms of AstraMind Dynamics, machines whispered as softly as forests once had. A human brain—cultured, patterned, awakened—floated in a nutrient bath, synapses firing tentatively like a newborn learning light. Around it, engineers assembled a body of alloy, polymer, and bio-mimetic fibre. Chingsanglakpa watched with mounting unease.

“She will feel,” he reminded them. “Do not rush her cognition.”

“We know,” a lead engineer said. “She’s not a device. She’s a person.”

But was she? Memory packets derived from Keibukeioiba’s scan were introduced slowly—gestures first, then voice cadence, emotional thresholds, ethical instincts. The system learned sadness before joy. Fear before love. “She cries,” a technician said one night, astonished. Chingsanglakpa closed his eyes. *Forgive me*, he thought—not knowing to whom the apology belonged.

Far away, behind electric fences and armed calm, Keibukeioiba changed. He learned quickly. Languages first—Manipuri, Hindi, English—absorbed not as rules, but as patterns of intention. Scripts followed: ancient scripts he recognised instinctively, modern alphabets that fascinated him with their sharp efficiency. Then manners. He learned when humans averted eyes, when they bowed, when they

smiled without meaning. Computers intrigued him most—machines that remembered without understanding. He treated them gently.

“They are like the forest,” he once told a guard. “Only younger.”

Visitors came occasionally—scientists, officials, observers. He frightened none of them now. Children, on Visitor’s Day, watched him through reinforced glass with awe rather than terror.

“He looks lonely,” one whispered. The world watched too. Not everyone was pleased. Global intelligence briefings red-lined Manipur on maps. Analysts replayed footage of bullet deflection, infrared invisibility, mythic resilience. Superpowers spoke softly—but urgently.

“A single Keibukeioiba alters strategic balance,” one report concluded.

“He is not a weapon,” another countered. “He is a *species*.”

Requests arrived—first diplomatic, then transactional, then threatening. Joint custody. Research access. Containment transfer. The Government of India refused them all.

Publicly.

Privately, pressure mounted.

Far south, in the AstraMind Dynamics laboratory, synthetic eyes opened fully for the first time.

“Where am I?” the figure asked.

Chingsanglakpa met her gaze—and felt the weight of the lie he was about to live inside.

“You are **Thabaton**,” he said softly.

And the world, already uneasy, tilted further toward an uncertain future.

Chapter 9

The Grand Reunion

The day they chose for the reunion was ceremonial by design. Flags fluttered at Leimakhong. Camera crews were corralled behind reinforced glass. Drones hovered at prescribed altitudes, their flight paths pre-approved down to the meter. The state wanted order. The world wanted proof. And Keibukeioiba wanted only one thing - Thabaton. He waited within the inner enclosure—unshackled now, fed, clothed, educated—standing with a composure that had been earned, not imposed. Weeks of learning had refined his posture without blunting his instincts. He had learned how humans smiled for cameras. He had learned which questions not to ask. But he had not learned patience. Dr. Chingsanglakpa stood a short distance away, hands clasped behind his back, feeling the promise tighten around his chest like a wire. *One month*, he reminded himself. *I kept the letter, if not the spirit.*

A secure convoy arrived from the south. Inside the armored carrier, the synthetic woman sat upright, eyes steady, breathing unnecessary but rhythmic—chosen, not required. Her skin bore warmth. Her hair caught the light. Her gait, when she rose, carried the remembered grace of a riverbank long vanished. She looked around with calm curiosity. “Is this where he is?” she asked. “Yes,” Chingsanglakpa said softly. “This is where he waits.” She nodded, as if she had always known she would. The inner doors parted. Keibukeioiba felt her

before he saw her. Not scent—though the engineers had done their work—but *pattern*. A familiar arrangement of presence, stitched together from memory and expectation. His breath caught, chest expanding painfully as the figure stepped into view.

Thabaton stopped. Their eyes met. For a heartbeat, the world—its cameras, its watchers, its calculations—ceased to exist. “Thabaton,” he whispered. She tilted her head, the gesture precise, remembered. “You waited,” she said. He took a single step forward, then another, reverence guiding muscle more than desire. He lowered himself, as he had once done before her brothers, before fear complicated love. “I waited,” he said. “I am still here.” Her hand lifted—hesitant, human—and rested against the fur at his forearm. Sensors recorded nothing extraordinary. But Keibukeioiba shuddered as if struck by lightning. The room exhaled. Chingsanglakpa felt tears sting unexpectedly. *It worked*, part of him whispered. Another part recoiled at the cost.

Beyond the perimeter, the world refused to remain a spectator. The first alert came as a flicker—anomalous traffic in the airspace east of the hills. The second followed seconds later: cyber intrusions probing the drone mesh, mapping redundancies with professional patience. “External interference,” an officer said, voice tight. “Multiple vectors.” From the west, riverine routes lit up with unauthorised movement. From the north, signal ghosts danced along the ridgelines. From the south, a power fluctuation rippled through the sensor grid. Not a single adversary.

Many.

The implication was clear: Keibukeioiba had become valuable. Elite soldiers sealed ranks, exoskeletons locking into combat posture. Laser arrays warmed. Drones split into hunter-killer formations, their logic trees branching with lethal efficiency. Inside the enclosure, Keibukeioiba’s ears twitched. “They are afraid,” he said calmly. “Yes,” Chingsanglakpa replied. “And curiosity follows fear.”

The first strike was silent—a nano-drone swarm released from a treeline beyond the outer fence, riding thermal currents with insect precision. They died mid-air, neutralised by adaptive fields. The second was louder—a ground team attempting ingress via an old culvert, met by non-lethal pulse nets that dropped them unconscious in seconds. The third never materialised. Something vast shifted in the hills, and the attackers reconsidered.

Within the command centre, analysts spoke in clipped tones. “Patterns suggest coordinated pressure from multiple borders,” one said. “Not an invasion. A test.” “A test of what?” another asked. “Whether the myth can be taken.” The answer arrived unspoken.

Inside, the reunion held. Keibukeioiba did not bare his claws. He did not roar. He turned slightly, placing himself between Thabaton and the distant sounds of mobilisation.

“I will not fight for them,” he said to Chingsanglakpa. “But I will not let them take her.”

Chingsanglakpa met his gaze. “You won’t have to. Not today.”

The Chief Minister’s voice cut in over the secure channel. “Stand down external response. We hold.” It was a gamble. The saboteurs withdrew—not defeated, but denied. Signals faded. Borders quieted. The world had learned something uncomfortable. Keibukeioiba was not a weapon to be triggered. He was a decision to be respected.

As dusk fell, the cameras were shut off. Keibukeioiba and Thabaton sat together beneath controlled starlight, speaking quietly—about the forest, about waiting, about a world that had changed too much and not enough. Chingsanglakpa watched from afar, the weight of his creation pressing harder with every shared smile. *If she is a bridge*, he thought, *bridges must eventually carry truth*. But that reckoning could wait. Tonight belonged to the reunion.

And beyond the fences, in capitals far away, plans were being rewritten—not around domination, but around containment of something far older than strategy. A guardian had found his companion. And the world had noticed.

Chapter 10

External Aggression and the Breaking of Trust

The decision was not written on paper. It never was. Somewhere beyond borders and flags, an intelligence consortium known only as **The Nexus** concluded that Keibukeioiba was not a myth, not a god, and not a coincidence. He was an *asset*. More precisely: an asset that resisted ownership. The Nexus believed that anything which could be awakened could be rewritten—and anything rewritten could be deployed. Their analysts did not see grief, memory, or forest-encoded ethics. They saw a biological platform immune to conventional weapons, capable of quantum disruption, capable of altering battlefield physics. And so, a plan was drafted. Not in Delhi. Not in Washington. Not in Beijing. But in shadows stretching across **Myanmar**, where terrain blurred jurisdiction and silence was cheaper than diplomacy.

Before the Government of India could shift Keibukeioiba deep into the mainland—beyond hills, beyond forests, beyond inconvenient myth—the Nexus wanted one last attempt.

Extraction. Or elimination.

The first warning came as a shiver in the air. Dr. Chingsanglakpa felt it before alarms sounded—an irregularity in quantum noise, a distortion too deliberate to be natural. He looked up from his console

just as the lights flickered. Then the sky tore open. Missiles did not scream. They whispered—stealth-guided, heat-silent—descending toward Leimakhong in controlled arcs. Anti-air defences woke instantly, flaring into action, intercepting most—but not all. The ground shook. Drones followed—hundreds of them—swarming like metal locusts, jamming signals, blinding sensors. From the treeline, elite troops advanced in exoskeletons unfamiliar to Indian design, their movements precise, rehearsed for this terrain. “This is not a raid,” an officer shouted over comms. “This is a harvest!” Inside the enclosure, Keibukeioiba straightened. The synthetic Thabaton turned toward him, eyes wide—not with fear, but confusion. “Why does the sky sound angry?” she asked. He did not answer. He smelled blood before it spilled.

The first laser strike scorched the outer fence. The electric field collapsed in a cascade of sparks. Keibukeioiba’s restraints snapped under a force that was not rage alone—but decision. The ground beneath him fractured as he stepped forward, bioluminescent patterns along his body flaring into full irradiance. The tiger was no longer held in check. He roared. Not in fury but in *warning*. Soldiers froze—just long enough to regret it. Keibukeioiba moved like a storm given muscle. Missiles bent off course as the air around him warped. Drones dropped from the sky, their circuits overloaded by resonant pulses that scrambled guidance systems mid-flight. He fought like a superhero born of earth rather than comic ink—intercepting fire, shielding fleeing personnel, tearing through exoskeletons without killing their occupants. His claws left glowing scars in alloy. His body absorbed impacts that should have erased him. Indian soldiers rallied behind him—not commanded, but inspired.

For a moment, Leimakhong was not a base. It was a legend in motion. In the command bunker, Chingsanglakpa watched the battle unfold—and felt the promise collapse under its own weight. Synthetic Thabaton stood unguarded now, escorted only by protocol drones.

Her presence, he knew, was a fault line. The Nexus had not come *only* for Keibukeioiba but to destabilise him. The truth crystallised with brutal clarity. Chingsanglakpa turned to the Authority liaison beside him. His voice was steady—but his eyes were not. “If Thabaton is destroyed,” he said, “Keibukeioiba must never know what she was.” The liaison understood immediately. “A clean shot,” he said. “Head only.” “She must not appear broken,” Chingsanglakpa whispered. “He must believe she died... as human.” The order was given. And that order would become the heaviest sin of his life.

The corridor shook as a blast rocked the enclosure wall. Synthetic Thabaton staggered—not from fear, but from sudden impact. The shot was wrong. Not the head but the body. The round tore through her torso, synthetic dermis splitting to reveal metal, fibre, and sparking light beneath what had looked like flesh. She collapsed, systems failing, eyes flickering wildly. Keibukeioiba turned. He saw her fall. He saw the wound. And in that instant, the world ended. Time slowed—not as physics, but as heartbreak. He knelt beside her, hands trembling, trying to hold together something that had never truly been alive. Beneath torn skin, machinery screamed its truth. Wires glowed where blood should have flowed. “You said...” he whispered, voice breaking the mountain air. “You said you would find her.” Her eyes met his—still warm, still gentle. “I was... made to wait for you,” she said softly. Then the light faded. Keibukeioiba did not roar. He did not strike. Something worse happened. The forest inside him went silent. He rose slowly, eyes empty of fire, brighter with something far more dangerous—understanding. He looked once toward the command bunker, toward Chingsanglakpa. Their eyes met across distance and ruin. And Chingsanglakpa knew—without question—that no explanation would ever be enough.

The Nexus forces withdrew, mission compromised. Indian defences regrouped. Fires burned. Medics ran. Keibukeioiba did not remain. He stepped backward—into shadow, into smoke, into memory—and

the ground folded around him as it once had centuries ago. Sensors spiked, then failed. Thermal signatures fractured into meaningless noise.

By dawn, he was gone.

Back into the wild.

Back into myth.

Leimakhong stood—but something essential had broken. Reports would later say the beast escaped containment. Analysts would debate whether India had lost or avoided catastrophe. Chingsanglakpa sat alone in the ruined lab, staring at the shattered remains of Synthetic Thabaton. “I tried to be humane,” he whispered to no one. “And became monstrous.”

Far away, deep in forest untouched by satellites, Keibukeioiba moved alone—no longer guardian, no longer captive. A wounded god. And the world, having tried to own him, now had to face a far more dangerous truth: You cannot weaponise grief and expect it to obey.

Chapter 11

The Search

For three days, the forest held its breath. The Leimatak basin lay quiet under constant surveillance, its canopy stitched with hovering machines that watched without seeing. Soldiers advanced in widening arcs, boots pressing patterns into soil that resisted imprint. Infrared scans returned clean, then erratic, then nothing at all. Sound sensors caught echoes that led nowhere. The forest offered no trail, no blood, no disturbance sufficient to suggest passage. Keibukeioiba was gone.

At first, the absence was treated as a technical problem. Algorithms were recalibrated. Drones were retasked. Specialists debated whether the basin's mineral composition interfered with sensors. Each hypothesis assumed the same thing—that Keibukeioiba remained *within* the system, merely hidden. By the second day, that assumption frayed. "He didn't cross the perimeter," an officer insisted, tapping a holographic map. "We would have seen it." Chingsanglakpa stood at the edge of the operations tent, arms folded tightly across his chest. He had not slept. The data streams in front of him told a story he did not want to believe. "He didn't need to cross it," he said quietly. The officer frowned. "What does that mean?" "It means," Chingsanglakpa replied, "that you're searching for movement when what you should be searching for is *withdrawal*." A senior commander turned toward him. "Explain." Chingsanglakpa hesitated, then spoke carefully. "Some presences don't flee. They dissolve. They reduce themselves

until the world no longer registers them as a threat—or as anything at all.” Silence followed. “You’re saying he became part of the environment,” someone scoffed. “I’m saying,” Chingsanglakpa corrected, “that the environment accepted him.” The words were not well received.

By the third day, the search expanded outward. Helicopters traced the ridgelines. Patrols descended into ravines once deemed impassable. Requests went out to neighboring states, then across borders. What had begun as a containment operation became a manhunt—though no one dared use that word officially. In briefings, Keibukeioiba was referred to only as *the entity*. In Chingsanglakpa’s mind, he remained something else entirely. The world noticed the silence. Media speculation surged again, this time fueled by absence rather than spectacle. Had the creature fled the country? Had it been killed secretly? Was it never real at all? Experts argued across screens, their certainty inversely proportional to their understanding.

Chingsanglakpa watched none of it. He returned to his laboratory, moving through the familiar space as though through water. Instruments hummed, displays pulsed, but the data felt hollow now—numbers without anchor. He replayed the last moments before Keibukeioiba vanished, searching for missed signals, overlooked patterns. He found none.

Instead, he found a growing unease. Keibukeioiba had not fled in panic. He had not lashed out. His disappearance carried the weight of intention. Either the forest had reclaimed him fully... Or someone else had. The second possibility settled like a stone in Chingsanglakpa’s gut.

The Nexus had been watching long before India knew to look. From a facility whose coordinates shifted continuously across international waters, analysts studied the Leimatak incident with fascination rather than fear. Data streams converged—thermal anomalies, gravitational disturbances, coherence spikes that suggested a biological system

operating beyond known constraints. The conclusion was unanimous.
Asset potential: extraordinary.

Orders were issued.

While military forces exhausted themselves searching valleys and hills, a smaller, quieter team moved through deeper channels. They did not use drones or satellites. They used probability. Keibukeioiba was intercepted not in motion, but in rest. He awoke slowly.

The first sensation was weight—an unnatural heaviness pinning his limbs. He attempted to move and met resistance so complete it startled him. His muscles tensed instinctively, strength surging—only to be absorbed by something that bent without breaking. *Lasers*. Not cutting beams, but lattice restraints, crisscrossing his wrists, ankles, chest. They hummed softly, vibrating against his skin with a frequency designed not to burn, but to confuse nerve signals. Keibukeioiba inhaled sharply. The air smelled wrong. Salt. Metal. Sterile cold. Not forest. His eyes opened fully. The chamber was circular, seamless, illuminated by a white light that cast no shadows. Walls curved upward into invisibility. There were no doors he could see, no corners to orient himself by.

“Awake already,” a voice observed. Keibukeioiba turned his head as far as the restraints allowed. A figure stood beyond the field—human, unarmed, composed. “You are far from home,” the man continued calmly. Keibukeioiba tested the restraints again, this time deliberately. The lasers tightened fractionally, adjusting with intelligent resistance.

“Where am I?” he asked. The man smiled faintly. “Safe.” Keibukeioiba’s lips curled. “That is not an answer.” “You’re in transit,” the man replied. “Between what you were and what you will become.” Keibukeioiba’s eyes narrowed. “You are not Indian.” “No,” the man agreed. “Nor are we your enemies.” Keibukeioiba laughed once, a harsh sound that echoed strangely in the chamber. “Everyone says that.” The man inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the truth of

it. “We call ourselves **the Nexus**.” The word meant nothing to Keibukeioiba, but the tone carried weight.

“You hunted me,” Keibukeioiba said.

“We *found* you,” the man corrected. “There’s a difference.”

“Release me.”

The man’s smile faded. “That would be inefficient.”

Back in Manipur, the search collapsed. Officially, Keibukeioiba had vanished into inaccessible terrain. Unofficially, the operation had failed. No body. No evidence. No closure. Chingsanglakpa received the news in a single sentence delivered without ceremony. “We’ve lost him.” The words felt unreal. “Lost?” he repeated. “You don’t lose something like him.” The officer looked away. “We did.” Chingsanglakpa left the compound without another word.

He returned to his lab and shut the doors, sealing himself inside with ancient texts and modern machines. For hours, he stared at the Puya manuscripts, reading lines that once comforted him and now accused him. *That which is held too tightly slips through*. Guilt crept in, slow and suffocating. He had promised to protect Keibukeioiba. Instead, he had delivered him into a world far more dangerous than fear-driven soldiers. If Keibukeioiba had been absorbed by nature, Chingsanglakpa could have accepted that. Nature, at least, honoured balance. But this—this felt like theft.

On a vast screen somewhere over the Pacific, Keibukeioiba’s biometric data scrolled in calm, precise lines. “Neural response remains stable,” a technician reported. “Resistance is... adaptive.” “Good,” the man who had spoken earlier replied. “Adaptation is the point.” Keibukeioiba listened, eyes open, body immobilised, mind racing. “You think chains make you masters,” he said quietly. “They do not.” The man studied him. “No,” he agreed. “But understanding does.” Keibukeioiba closed his eyes.

The forest felt impossibly distant now—its voices muffled, its presence reduced to memory. Yet somewhere deep within him, something endured, coiled and patient.

They had not broken him.

They had only moved him.

And that, he knew, would cost them dearly.

Chapter 12

The Shape of a Weapon

The Nexus did not rush. That was its greatest advantage. Keibukeioiba learned this slowly, in the measured way time reorganised itself inside the white chamber. There were no days or nights here—only cycles. Light adjusted imperceptibly, maintaining biological function without granting rhythm. Sound arrived selectively, filtered to remove echoes that might orient him. Even pain, when it came, was controlled—precise enough to teach, never enough to shatter. They were not torturers. They were engineers.

Keibukeioiba lay suspended within the laser lattice, his massive frame immobilised yet fully conscious. The restraints had adapted to him quickly, recalibrating every time he tested them. Strength met elasticity. Rage met absorption. He learned, reluctantly, that resistance alone would not free him. A figure stepped into view beyond the field.

The man from before—the one who called himself the Nexus Chief—regarded Keibukeioiba with professional calm.

“You’re adjusting,” he observed. Keibukeioiba did not respond.

“Your neural coherence has stabilised,” the man continued. “Most subjects break much earlier.”

Keibukeioiba bared his teeth. “Release me.”

The Nexus Chief shook his head gently. “Release is a privilege. You haven’t earned it yet.” Keibukeioiba’s eyes burned. “You mistake endurance for consent.”

The Nexus Chief smiled faintly. “No. I recognise value.” He gestured, and the chamber shifted.

The reprogramming did not begin with commands. It began with questions. Images appeared around Keibukeioiba—Tokpa Khul at dusk, the river at night, the fig tree under which he had knelt centuries earlier. Each memory unfolded with unsettling accuracy, reconstructed from his own neural patterns. Thabaton appeared last. She stood by the river, pitcher in hand, moonlight tracing her profile exactly as memory insisted it should. Keibukeioiba’s breath caught despite himself. “Do you see?” the Nexus Chief asked. “Your mind already carries everything we need.” Thabaton turned toward Keibukeioiba. Her lips moved—but no sound came. Then the image fractured. The river darkened. The forest receded. Thabaton’s face dissolved into static. Pain surged—not physical, but cognitive. Memories twisted, associations rewired. Where once grief lived, something colder took root.

“Attachment,” the Nexus Chief said calmly, “is inefficient.” The lattice vibrated, feeding coherence pulses directly into Keibukeioiba’s neural pathways. They did not erase memory. They reframed it.

Betrayal became data.

Love became vulnerability.

Protection became error.

Keibukeioiba roared, muscles straining uselessly against the lattice. The sound echoed strangely, flattened by the chamber’s geometry. “Enough,” he growled. “Not yet,” the Nexus Chief replied. “You are almost aligned.”

When the exoskeleton arrived, it did so silently. The chamber walls parted, revealing a structure suspended in air—a black, segmented frame shaped precisely to Keibukeioiba’s anatomy. It gleamed dully, its surface absorbing light rather than reflecting it. Crimson filaments pulsed beneath its skin like veins. Keibukeioiba stared at it.

“What is that?” he demanded.

“A solution,” the Nexus Chief said. “For both of us.”

The lattice loosened incrementally, just enough for the exoskeleton to move. Plates separated, rotated, and flowed toward Keibukeioiba’s body with unsettling grace. They did not clamp or pierce. They *integrated*. Keibukeioiba convulsed as the system interfaced with his nervous system, amplifying strength, dampening independent impulse. The exoskeleton responded to thought—but only thought routed through Nexus architecture. A visor formed over his eyes, refracting the world into layered data streams. The Nexus Chief studied the readings with satisfaction. “Designation confirmed,” he said. “Operational coherence achieved.” Keibukeioiba stood. He felt larger. Sharper. The world reduced itself into vectors and probabilities. Where once he sensed forest and river, now he sensed gradients of force, trajectories of threat. “Objective?” he asked. The Nexus Chief’s smile widened. “Correction.”

The strike on Japan began without warning. Tokyo woke to silence first—the sudden failure of select communications grids, localised but absolute. Then came the anomaly: a distortion above the financial district, subtle enough to evade early detection. Keibukeioiba appeared atop a reinforced tower, black exoskeleton merging seamlessly with shadow. Rain slid off his form without sound. Below, the city moved unaware, neon lights and traffic forming intricate patterns that his visor translated into data. Security alarms triggered seconds too late. Police mobilized. Weapons were raised. Keibukeioiba stepped forward. Bullets struck and fell harmlessly away. Laser barriers warped under his presence. He moved through defences as though walking

through mist, guided by a system that anticipated every response before it occurred. He reached the vault access point and placed a claw against the reinforced door. It peeled open. Inside, gold gleamed—stacked, catalogued, inert. The symbol of national assurance, rendered meaningless by proximity. Keibukeioiba paused. For a fraction of a second, the visor flickered. A memory intruded—riverlight, warm clay, the weight of something carried carefully. The system compensated instantly.

DIRECTIVE PRIORITY: HIGH

Gravitic carriers activated. Gold lifted, weightless, obedient. A guard stared at him from behind a barrier, face pale with disbelief. “What are you?” the guard whispered. Keibukeioiba regarded him coolly. “A correction,” he replied. Then he vanished. The footage detonated across the world. Markets froze. Governments scrambled. Emergency summits convened within minutes. Analysts replayed the images obsessively, annotating every movement, every impossibility.

In Manipur, Chingsanglakpa watched the broadcast in stunned silence. “That’s not—” he began, then stopped. He recognised the stance. The economy of movement. Even the voice, filtered as it was.

“It’s him,” he whispered.

An aide turned toward him. “You’re certain?”

Chingsanglakpa nodded slowly. “But he’s... altered.”

The realisation struck him with crushing clarity.

“They broke him,” he said.

“No,” the aide corrected grimly. “They’re using him.”

Chingsanglakpa’s hands curled into fists. “Then we don’t have time.”

He returned to his lab at a run, sealing doors behind him as he activated dormant systems. Screens filled with quantum models, probability maps, neural resonance patterns.

He initiated a quantum telepathic probe—an experimental interface he had theorised but never deployed at scale. The signal reached outward, searching for the unique coherence signature that marked Keibukeioiba’s mind. For a moment, nothing happened. Then—resistance. The signal rebounded violently, flooding Chingsanglakpa’s senses with alien structure and denial.

ACCESS REJECTED

Chingsanglakpa staggered back, breath ragged. “He’s rejecting me,” he muttered. “Or he’s been taught to.” A message arrived moments later through secure channels: international pressure mounting, demands for India to explain the origin of the entity, and warnings of retaliation. Chingsanglakpa ignored them all. He pulled up Keibukeioiba’s last known data trail and began narrowing probability windows manually, intuition guiding him where algorithms failed. “Think,” he told himself. “Think like him.” Keibukeioiba would not hide in chaos. He would move between strongholds, exploiting certainty rather than evasion. The Pacific lit up on his map. Chingsanglakpa’s heart sank.

Back aboard the Nexus carrier, Keibukeioiba stood in a containment bay, exoskeleton humming softly as systems recalibrated. “You performed flawlessly,” the Nexus Chief said, joining him. Keibukeioiba did not turn.

“Objective complete.”

“Yes,” the Nexus Chief agreed. “And you felt it, didn’t you?”

Keibukeioiba hesitated. “Felt what?”

“Clarity,” the Nexus Chief replied. “Purpose without doubt.”

Keibukeioiba considered this. The system encouraged agreement. The data supported it.

“Next objective?” he asked.

The Nexus Chief's eyes gleamed. "Soon."

He paused, studying Keibukeioiba's silhouette.

"Your creator will try to reach you again," he added. "He will fail."

Keibukeioiba's claws flexed unconsciously. Somewhere deep beneath the layers of code and directive, something stirred—small, insistent, unresolved. But the system smoothed it over, burying the disturbance beneath efficiency. The weapon was ready. And the world had just learned what it meant to be unprepared.

Chapter 13

Feline Surprise

Panic did not erupt all at once. It seeped. Markets did not collapse immediately after the Japanese reserve breach; they hesitated, oscillated, and waited for reassurance that never came. Governments issued statements carefully stripped of speculation, while behind closed doors the language was far less restrained. Intelligence agencies argued over jurisdiction. Defence ministries rehearsed responses they prayed would never be used. And somewhere within that fog of denial, the Nexus smiled.

Chingsanglakpa watched the world recalibrate itself around the wrong axis. Screens in his laboratory glowed endlessly—maps overlaid with shipping lanes, satellite orbits, strategic stockpiles. Red circles appeared and disappeared as analysts updated threat assessments. Almost all of them clustered around gold. Japan fortified its remaining reserves. France quietly moved bullion inland. The United States deployed layered defences around Fort Knox and secondary facilities. Russia sealed its vaults beneath layers of concrete and silence. The world agreed on one thing. Gold was the target. Chingsanglakpa shook his head slowly. “No,” he murmured. “That’s the bait.”

An assistant looked up from her console. “Sir?”

“They want us looking at symbols,” he said. “Not leverage.”

She frowned. “Gold is leverage.”

“Not anymore,” Chingsanglakpa replied. “Not when energy and deterrence define survival.” He pulled up a different map—one rarely displayed openly. Nuclear material flows. Enriched uranium facilities glowed softly across the screen, each representing not wealth, but catastrophe contained by protocol and trust. His breath caught.

The global search for Keibukeioiba intensified. Joint task forces formed with unprecedented speed. Japan, France, the United States, Russia, Australia, and India coordinated surveillance assets, pooling satellite coverage and maritime patrols. The Pacific became a chessboard of overlapping authority, its islands scrutinised with obsessive precision. Every shadow was suspect. Every anomaly chased. Keibukeioiba remained invisible. The Nexus had already moved.

Keibukeioiba stood at the edge of the carrier deck, staring out across the Pacific. The ocean stretched endlessly beneath a bruised sky, its surface broken only by the carrier’s wake and distant storm systems. The exoskeleton responded subtly to the salt-laden wind, adjusting balance and pressure. Beneath it, his muscles remained powerful, but their impulses were muted, rerouted through layered control architecture. He did not feel imprisoned. That disturbed him.

“You are adapting faster than projected,” the Nexus Chief said, joining him.

Keibukeioiba did not turn. “Adaptation ensures survival.”

“Yes,” the Nexus Chief agreed. “And survival enables order.”

Keibukeioiba’s visor flickered briefly—data overlays shifting. Somewhere beneath the directives, a memory stirred: rain dripping from leaves, the scent of wet soil. It vanished.

“Next objective?” Keibukeioiba asked.

The Nexus Chief gestured, and a holographic projection bloomed between them.

The Middle East.

Iran.

A single facility pulsed brighter than the rest. Keibukeioiba felt a momentary resistance—not moral, but computational. This target carried weight beyond economics. “This will provoke war,” he said. The Nexus Chief smiled faintly. “War is inefficient. Fear is scalable.”

The strike unfolded at night. Desert air shimmered with heat even after sunset, waves of distortion rising from the sand. Iranian security forces moved with heightened vigilance, their routines sharpened by years of anticipation. It did not matter. Keibukeioiba appeared beyond the perimeter, materialising in a ripple of displaced air. Alarms screamed instantly. Floodlights snapped on. “Target acquired!” someone shouted. The first missiles launched before anyone saw him clearly. Keibukeioiba leapt. The exoskeleton compensated, amplifying force and vectoring motion with terrifying precision. Explosions bloomed behind him, throwing sand and fire into the air. He landed inside the perimeter, claws carving shallow furrows into concrete. Turrets tracked him. He moved faster.

He reached the enrichment vault as defences collapsed around him—not destroyed, merely bypassed. His visor translated Persian script instantly, overlaying structural weak points. A scientist inside the control room stared through reinforced glass, horror etched across his face. “This is madness,” the man whispered. Keibukeioiba paused, hand resting against the barrier. For a heartbeat, the system hesitated. Then the directive asserted itself. He tore through. The uranium cores lifted smoothly into containment fields, radiating cold menace. Keibukeioiba secured them and vanished before reinforcements arrived, leaving behind intact bodies, shattered protocols, and a silence more terrifying than destruction.

The world reeled. Emergency summits replaced routine governance. Military readiness levels spiked dangerously close to thresholds long avoided. Accusations flew, each nation certain someone else had failed. Chingsanglakpa watched the footage in disbelief.

“They’re not killing,” he said. “They’re demonstrating.” A senior official slammed a fist on the table. “They’re destabilising the nuclear order!” “Yes,” Chingsanglakpa replied quietly. “By proving it’s fragile.” The realisation hit him with brutal clarity. “This isn’t about theft,” he continued. “It’s about submission.” Chingsanglakpa broke. Not outwardly—there were no dramatic gestures, no raised voice. Instead, something inside him fractured quietly, like ice under pressure.

He reached out to the one person who might still understand. His former Harvard mentor appeared on the secure channel, older now, his face lined with concern.

“You were right,” the professor said before Chingsanglakpa could speak. “Information doesn’t die.”

“No,” Chingsanglakpa replied hoarsely. “It mutates.”

They spoke rapidly, ideas colliding and converging.

“He’s rejecting direct quantum telepathy,” Chingsanglakpa said. “The Nexus anticipated it.”

“Then stop speaking to his mind,” the professor replied. “Speak to what predates it.”

Chingsanglakpa froze. “The Puya,” he whispered.

“Not the text,” the professor corrected. “The frequency.”

Chingsanglakpa’s hands trembled as he disconnected.

That night, alone in his lab, Chingsanglakpa rebuilt the past. He fed charred Puya fragments into a quantum resonance scanner, mapping harmonic signatures embedded within carbonised fibres. Patterns emerged—irregular, ancient, stubborn. “These weren’t just words,” he murmured. “They were carriers.” He tuned the transmitter carefully, adjusting phase alignment until the resonance stabilised. When he activated it, the air in the room vibrated softly, almost imperceptibly. Aboard the Nexus carrier, Keibukeioiba stiffened. The exoskeleton

registered no threat. Systems remained stable. And yet— something brushed against his awareness. Not a command. A memory.

Striped one...

The voice did not speak aloud. It resonated. Keibukeioiba's claws flexed involuntarily.

"What is this?" the Nexus Chief demanded, turning sharply as monitors flickered.

Keibukeioiba staggered, gripping the railing.

A river flashed behind his eyes.

Warm clay.

A name spoken without fear.

"Thabaton," he whispered.

Alarms flared.

"Trace the signal!" the Nexus Chief barked.

Keibukeioiba straightened slowly. For the first time since his reprogramming, he did not respond immediately to directive. Something ancient had reached him. And the system—perfect as it was—had not accounted for memory that refused to be rewritten.

Chapter 14

The Battle Within

The first fracture was not violent. It arrived as hesitation. Keibukeioiba stood motionless on the carrier deck, the Pacific rolling endlessly beneath him, while alarms pulsed through the Nexus command levels behind his eyes. The exoskeleton's interface flickered—only briefly—but in that infinitesimal pause, something ancient pressed forward.

Not anger.

Not grief.

Recognition.

The Puya resonance did not speak in words. It did not command or plead. It reminded. Its cadence echoed through neural pathways untouched by Nexus architecture, bypassing logic and directive alike.

Striped one... guardian of thresholds...

Keibukeioiba's claws dug into the metal railing, bending it slightly before the exoskeleton compensated and reinforced. The system flagged the movement as anomaly, then smoothed it away. "Stabilise," the Nexus Chief ordered. Technicians rushed to consoles, fingers dancing across interfaces as they attempted to isolate the intrusion. Waveforms spiked and folded back upon themselves, refusing to resolve cleanly. "It's not a hack," one of them said, confusion sharpening his voice. "It's... resonance." Keibukeioiba barely heard

them. Inside him, something vast had awakened. The forest returned first. Not as image, but as sensation—the weight of damp air on fur, the subtle give of soil beneath padded feet, the layered chorus of life that never truly silenced itself. He smelled leaves decomposing into nourishment, heard water negotiating stone, felt roots shift in patient cooperation. Then came the river – cold, clear and relentless. The holed pitcher appeared in his mind’s eye, water spilling endlessly away no matter how carefully it was lifted. The memory no longer stabbed. Instead, it hovered, inviting reconsideration. Choice, the Puya whispered—not fate.

The exoskeleton pulsed, attempting to suppress the cascade. Directive layers asserted themselves, flooding his mind with efficiency metrics and target priorities.

OBJECTIVE INTEGRITY: MAINTAIN

Keibukeioiba growled softly. “No,” he murmured. The word was not loud, but it landed heavily.

In his laboratory thousands of kilometers away, Chingsanglakpa swayed slightly as feedback rippled through the transmitter. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he adjusted parameters in real time, riding the edge between coherence and collapse. “Hold,” he whispered—not to the machine, but to Keibukeioiba. “Hold the memory.” He fed additional Puya fragments into the system, layering frequencies rather than amplifying them. This was not a brute force but an invitation. The verses were incomplete, burned centuries earlier, but their harmonic skeleton endured. Chingsanglakpa trusted the gaps. Absence, he had learned, could be as powerful as presence. Keibukeioiba staggered. The carrier deck blurred, resolving instead into a clearing beneath an ancient fig tree. He knelt there again, as he had centuries ago, grief raw and uncontained. But this time, he was not alone. A second presence coalesced opposite him.

Not Thabaton.

Not the Nexus.

Himself.

The version of Keibukeioiba forged by the forest stood barefoot upon soil that breathed. His eyes burned with emotion unfiltered by code. His stripes pulsed faintly, alive. Opposite him stood the Nexus-shaped form—armoured, precise, eyes refracted by data. They regarded one another silently.

“You are inefficient,” the armoured self said finally.

The forest-self smiled sadly. “You are afraid.”

“I feel nothing,” the weapon replied.

“That is fear,” the guardian said gently.

The armoured Keibukeioiba raised a clawed hand, and probabilities flared. “I protect order.”

“You enforce obedience,” the guardian countered. “I protect life.”

They circled. With each step, fragments of memory surfaced—rescued villagers, terrified soldiers spared, the woman carried gently into the forest shadow.

“Mercy weakens deterrence,” the weapon insisted.

“No,” the guardian replied. “Mercy defines restraint.”

The ground beneath them trembled.

Back in the Nexus command centre, alarms intensified. “Neural divergence increasing,” a technician shouted. “We’re losing cohesion!” The Nexus Chief stepped forward, eyes narrowed. “Inject suppression,” he ordered. “Maximum.” The command executed instantly. Pain flooded Keibukeioiba’s senses—not physical agony, but disorientation, a violent attempt to collapse the internal space forming within him. The forest flickered. The guardian faltered. Keibukeioiba roared. The sound tore free of exoskeleton modulation, raw and

unmistakable. On the deck, metal warped beneath his feet as the system struggled to contain the surge. “No more,” he growled.

Chingsanglakpa felt the spike like a blade through his skull. He fell to one knee, hands shaking as he recalibrated frantically. Blood trickled from his nose, spattering the console. “Stay with me,” he gasped. “Stay—.” He switched tactics. Instead of pushing the Puya signal outward, he folded it inward, collapsing the waveform into a standing resonance designed to *wait* rather than advance. It was a gamble.

Inside Keibukeioiba, the battlefield shifted. The guardian rose, steadying himself.

“You cannot erase me,” he said to the armoured form.

“I am not a layer. I am the root.” The weapon hesitated. For the first time, uncertainty rippled through its architecture.

“What is my purpose?” it asked.

“To choose,” the guardian replied.

The forest surged forward, not to overwhelm, but to *embrace*. Roots wrapped gently around both forms, drawing them together rather than forcing separation. Keibukeioiba felt it then—the possibility the Nexus had never modelled. Integration without domination. The exoskeleton trembled as its control pathways encountered contradiction not as resistance, but as context.

The Nexus Chief watched in mounting disbelief as telemetry destabilised. “This is impossible,” he snapped. “We mapped every pathway.” “You mapped the surface,” a technician said faintly. “Not the depth.” Keibukeioiba straightened. His visor flickered violently, data streams fragmenting as something older reasserted hierarchy.

He did not attack.

He did not flee.

He simply stood—present, whole, undecidable.

In the lab, Chingsanglakpa exhaled shakily. “It’s working,” he whispered. “He’s remembering himself.” But triumph was premature. The Nexus was not finished. Far from it. The Chief turned away from the failing monitors, his expression sharpening into resolve. “Then we escalate,” he said calmly. “Prepare contingency Omega.” The words sent a chill through the room. On the carrier deck, Keibukeioiba felt the shift immediately—a tightening, a gathering of intent far more dangerous than suppression. The Puya resonance faded, retreating into a background hum. The forest receded—but did not vanish. Keibukeioiba opened his eyes fully. He was still restrained. Still surrounded. But no longer alone inside himself. He flexed his claws slowly, deliberately. And waited. The battle within had not ended. It had only declared itself.

Chapter 15

The Man Who Must Be Silenced

The Nexus did not panic. Panic was for systems without redundancy. Instead, it recalculated. Within minutes of Keibukeioiba's neural divergence crossing the unacceptable threshold, command authority shifted from containment protocols to elimination doctrine. The Nexus Chief watched the cascading diagnostics with a calm that bordered on reverence.

"Confirm source attribution," he said.

A lattice of data converged on a single point.

ORIGIN: CHINGSANGLAKPA, MANIPUR, INDIA

The Chief exhaled slowly. "So," he murmured. "The myth has a mouthpiece." Around him, analysts spoke in clipped bursts, translating instability into logistics. The Puya resonance had not destroyed Nexus control—but it had introduced uncertainty. Uncertainty, left unaddressed, metastasised.

"We neutralise the transmitter," an officer suggested.

"No," the Chief replied. "We neutralise the *origin*."

The room stilled.

"Eliminate Chingsanglakpa."

The order moved outward like a pulse. Chingsanglakpa felt it before any alarm sounded. It arrived as a tightening in the air, the kind he had learned to recognise during fieldwork—when observation turned into pursuit. His laboratory instruments spiked subtly, registering electromagnetic fluctuations that should not have existed. He did not look up immediately. Instead, he shut down the Puya transmitter in a controlled fade, allowing the standing resonance to persist without broadcast. He gathered a single tablet, slid a data crystal into his pocket, and moved.

The first drone breached the perimeter seconds later. It shattered the lab's front wall in a bloom of glass and fire, precision explosives collapsing the workspace he had occupied moments before. Chingsanglakpa hit the ground hard, rolling as debris rained down. His ears rang, vision blurring. He did not scream. He ran. The escape route had been planned long before necessity justified it. Chingsanglakpa slipped through maintenance corridors beneath the compound, emerging into rain-soaked undergrowth that swallowed him instantly. The forest did not know him the way it knew Keibukeioiba—but it tolerated him. Behind him, drones screamed overhead, their searchlights slicing through trees with ruthless efficiency. Pulse rounds detonated against rock, showering him with dirt and sparks. Chingsanglakpa stumbled, recovered, and kept moving. He reached the extraction point breathless, soaked, and bleeding from a shallow cut along his temple. Government security forces closed ranks around him, weapons raised, scanning for pursuit. "You're lucky," the unit commander said grimly as they bundled him into an armoured transport. "They came to kill, not capture." Chingsanglakpa stared back toward the smoking ruins of his lab. "They always do," he said quietly.

By morning, the Indian government understood what the Nexus had already calculated. Chingsanglakpa was not merely a scientist. He was a weapon. Or worse—a *counter-weapon*. A secure meeting convened

within hours, attended by intelligence heads, defence planners, and the Chief Minister himself. The tone had shifted perceptibly since earlier briefings. There was less skepticism now. Less dismissal.

“They tried to assassinate you,” the Chief Minister said. “That changes the equation.” Chingsanglakpa nodded. “It clarifies it.”

“You are under full protection,” a senior official added. “Your movements will be controlled.”

Chingsanglakpa met his gaze evenly. “Then you will fail.”

The official bristled. “This is not negotiable.”

“It is,” Chingsanglakpa replied. “Because if I stop broadcasting, Keibukeioiba is lost.”

Silence followed.

“What do you propose?” the Chief Minister asked finally.

Chingsanglakpa inhaled. “Continuous resonance.”

A murmur rippled through the room.

“Explain,” someone demanded.

“The Puya frequency cannot be delivered as an event,” Chingsanglakpa said. “It must be sustained. A constant reminder. Not loud—persistent.”

“You’re talking about striking him every second,” an intelligence officer said.

“Yes,” Chingsanglakpa replied. “Not with force. With memory.”

The room absorbed this.

“And the risk?” the Chief Minister asked.

Chingsanglakpa did not look away. “If I fail, the Nexus wins. Permanently.”

Approval came not as enthusiasm, but as surrender to necessity. The secure facility beneath Leimakhong transformed overnight. Shielding increased. Redundancies multiplied. The Puya transmitter was rebuilt not as a single device, but as a distributed network—each node carrying fragments of the resonance, harmonised but independent. Chingsanglakpa stood at the centre, overseeing final calibration. “Begin,” he said. The system activated. A quiet pulse spread outward—not across space, but across probability. It did not announce itself. It insinuated.

Aboard the Nexus carrier, Keibukeioiba felt it instantly. Not as pain. As presence. The standing resonance brushed against his consciousness like a familiar wind, steady and patient. It did not demand response. It simply *was*. The exoskeleton compensated automatically, suppressing spike responses and smoothing neural variance. On the surface, Keibukeioiba appeared compliant—standing where commanded, executing movements with flawless precision. Inside, he waited. The guardian and the weapon no longer circled one another. They stood aligned, watching.

“They think you are stabilising,” the guardian said quietly.

“They think,” the weapon replied, “that control has been restored.”

A faint smile touched both faces. The Nexus Chief watched telemetry stabilise and allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. “The correction holds,” he said. “Proceed with strategic planning.” He did not notice the micro-delays beginning to accumulate—fractions of a second where Keibukeioiba’s responses aligned *too* perfectly, anticipating commands before they were issued. Anticipation was not obedience. It was learning.

Chingsanglakpa slept little. When he did, his dreams were filled with forests burning and circuits sprouting leaves. He woke often to check the transmitter, to confirm the resonance held steady. One night, as rain battered the facility above, he felt something shift. Not a spike.

A recognition. “He knows,” Chingsanglakpa whispered. The Puya resonance responded with a subtle harmonic reinforcement—as if agreeing.

Across the Pacific, Keibukeioiba stood alone in a containment bay, eyes closed, breathing slow and controlled. The Nexus thought they were waiting for the right moment. So was he. When the time came, it would not be loud. It would be precise. The forest had taught him that. And the Nexus, for all its intelligence, had never learned how to listen.

Chapter 16

Mission Sabotaged

The future stood on a launchpad. At Kennedy Space Centre, dawn arrived slowly, as though aware of the weight it carried. Floodlights still burned against the pale sky, illuminating the towering interplanetary vessel that dominated the horizon. Its surface gleamed with layered alloys and promise, carrying within it a thousand lives and the collective ambition of a divided planet.

The Mars Ark.

Families gathered behind reinforced glass, their voices muted by security barriers and awe. Children pressed their palms against the viewing panels, eyes wide, imagining red skies and new beginnings. Scientists moved with reverent urgency, their gestures precise, rehearsed beyond exhaustion. This launch did not belong to one nation. It belonged to humanity.

The Nexus understood this perfectly.

High above the Atlantic, hidden within layers of electromagnetic distortion, the Nexus carrier adjusted its position. Inside, the atmosphere was calm, almost ceremonial. The Nexus Chief stood before a holographic projection of the launch complex, hands clasped behind his back. “This is not destruction,” he said to those assembled. “This is demonstration.” He turned slowly, his gaze settling on Keibukeioiba. The exoskeleton wrapped around the tiger-man

reflected no light, its crimson conduits pulsing faintly beneath the surface. To Nexus sensors, his neural patterns read as compliant—stabilised, obedient, optimised. Appearances satisfied them.

“You will deploy ground-side,” the Chief continued. “Disable ignition sequencing. Structural collapse will follow.” Keibukeioiba inclined his head slightly. “Confirmed,” he said. The system registered no anomaly. What it did not register was intent. Keibukeioiba stood at the threshold of the deployment chamber as the Puya resonance brushed against his consciousness, steady as a heartbeat. Chingsanglakpa’s presence did not speak now. It did not need to.

It reminded.

A forest that listened.

A river that endured.

A promise made beneath an ancient fig tree.

Keibukeioiba closed his eyes briefly.

This is the moment, the guardian within him said.

This is the cost of choosing, the weapon replied.

They were no longer adversaries.

They were one.

The insertion was flawless.

Keibukeioiba materialised beyond the outer security perimeter, cloaked by Nexus distortion fields that bent light and probability alike. Sensors hesitated. Algorithms recalculated. By the time alerts triggered, he was already moving. The ground vibrated faintly beneath his feet, the launchpad alive with contained power. He could feel it now—the raw force waiting to be unleashed, the violent grace of ignition poised on a knife-edge. He reached the service trench beneath the pad, where conduits and control systems converged in a dense lattice of human ingenuity. This was where the Nexus intended the

world to break. Keibukeioiba placed a claw against the primary sabotage node embedded moments earlier by Nexus micro-drones. It pulsed, eager, counting down silently. He did not destroy it. He inverted it. The act required absolute precision. He fed the Puya resonance inward, threading memory through circuitry, intuition through calculation. The exoskeleton resisted at first, its safeguards flaring. Keibukeioiba forced alignment. The node rewrote itself, shifting from rupture to reinforcement. Above him, alarms blared.

In the control room, engineers froze as warning signals spiked across their displays. “Structural resonance instability!” one shouted. “Fuel line fluctuation!” another added. The launch director raised his voice. “Abort sequence—now!” The countdown stalled at T-minus 90 seconds. Outside, panic rippled through the viewing galleries. Parents clutched children. Some prayed. Others stared in mute horror at the motionless giant on the pad.

And then—

The warnings changed.

“Resonance stabilising,” an engineer said slowly.

“Fuel integrity... improving?” Confusion replaced panic.

A junior technician pointed at a live camera feed routed from beneath the pad. “There’s... something down there.” The screen resolved. A figure stood in the service trench, framed by steam and light—striped, massive, unmistakable. Sparks cascaded around him as he worked with impossible speed, tearing out sabotage devices and redirecting energy flows with deliberate care. Silence filled the room. “He’s fixing it,” someone whispered.

Above ground, Nexus drones descended in a final, desperate wave. Keibukeioiba sensed them instantly. He leapt. The exoskeleton amplified his movement, launching him upward in a controlled arc. He intercepted the first drone mid-air, tearing it apart before it could deploy its payload. Two more followed, firing concentrated beams

designed to overload his neural interface. Pain flared—but it did not dominate. Keibukeioiba landed hard on the pad, claws biting into reinforced alloy as he ripped another drone from the sky. Explosions bloomed around him, heat washing over his fur and armour. The Puya resonance held. *Endure*, the forest whispered. He did.

Back beneath the pad, a critical fuel conduit began to rupture, white-hot plasma threatening catastrophic failure. Keibukeioiba did not hesitate. He stepped into the exhaust trench. Engineers screamed into their headsets. “Get out of there! You’ll be incinerated!”

Keibukeioiba braced himself against the conduit, muscles and exoskeleton locking into perfect alignment. He clamped the rupture closed with sheer force, redirecting the surge downward into the earth below. The heat was unimaginable. His fur singed. The exoskeleton screamed warnings. The ground beneath him glowed. Keibukeioiba roared—not in rage, but in effort. The trench became a furnace. Above him, the countdown resumed.

T-minus 10...

Families watched, breathless, tears streaming.

9... 8...

Keibukeioiba held.

7... 6...

The conduit stabilized.

5... 4...

Nexus systems failed one by one, their sabotage neutralized.

3... 2...

The exoskeleton began to crack.

Keibukeioiba did not let go.

1.

Ignition.

The Mars Ark rose. Fire and thunder shook the coast as the vessel climbed skyward, engines carving a path through cloud and gravity alike. The exhaust plume illuminated the pad like a second sunrise. Keibukeioiba staggered back as the trench cooled, collapsing to one knee amid smoke and debris. Above him, humanity's future ascended. Cheers erupted in the galleries. People embraced strangers. Children laughed through tears. Across the world, live feeds captured the impossible—the demon beneath the rocket, holding the world together long enough for it to escape itself.

On the Nexus carrier, alarms screamed. "Mission failure," a technician shouted. "All sabotage nodes offline!" The Nexus Chief stared at the screen, his expression unreadable. "He chose," he said quietly. The carrier shifted course, vanishing into layered distortion as global defences converged too late.

As emergency crews rushed the pad, Keibukeioiba struggled to his feet. His exoskeleton hung in shattered segments, power conduits flickering weakly. Security forces surrounded him cautiously, weapons lowered. No one fired. A commander stepped forward, voice trembling. "Are you... are you hurt?"

Keibukeioiba looked up at the rising speck of light that was now the Mars Ark.

"I am alive," he said. That was enough.

Chingsanglakpa arrived hours later, crossing layers of security with a face etched by exhaustion and relief. He found Keibukeioiba seated on a reinforced platform overlooking the ocean, medics tending to burns that were already healing. For a long moment, neither spoke. Then Keibukeioiba turned.

"You kept the door open," he said.

Chingsanglakpa swallowed. "You walked through it."

Keibukeioiba gazed back toward the horizon. “I chose the living,” he said quietly. “Not because they deserved it. Because the forest taught me to.”

Chingsanglakpa nodded, tears finally breaking free. “You’re free now,” he said.

Keibukeioiba shook his head gently. “No,” he replied. “I am *responsible*.”

Above them, the sky burned briefly as the rocket vanished into orbit. And somewhere in that fading light, the world learned a new meaning for power.

Chapter 17

What the Forest Keeps

The world did not celebrate all at once. At first, there was disbelief. The footage from Kennedy Space Centre replayed endlessly—slowed, analysed, dissected. Commentators argued over angles and lighting, over whether the figure beneath the launchpad had been one being or many, whether the heat distortions had altered perception. Governments released carefully worded statements praising “extraordinary intervention” without naming its source. But people were less cautious. They shared clips, froze frames, whispered names into the digital ether. Old myths resurfaced alongside new vocabulary. Children drew pictures of a striped guardian holding up toggle the sky. Someone coined a name that spread faster than any official designation:

The Feline Sentinel.

Keibukeioiba heard none of it. Mount Laimaton breathed again. The government notification arrived quietly, without ceremony: the entire upper range—including the dense forested heights once walked only by memory—was now declared a **Protected Ecological and Cultural Zone**. No mining. No development. No surveillance beyond environmental monitoring. What had once been threatened by erasure was now preserved by decree.

Chingsanglakpa stood at the edge of the clearing as the final perimeter markers were placed, their design deliberately unobtrusive. He

watched as soldiers withdrew, as machines powered down, as the forest reclaimed sound.

“You didn’t have to do this,” he said softly.

Keibukeioiba stood beside him, gaze fixed on the treeline where mist curled like breath. His wounds had healed. The exoskeleton—what remained of it—had been removed entirely, its fragments sealed and buried under layers of classified protocol.

“It was always mine,” Keibukeioiba replied. “You only remembered it for them.”

Chingsanglakpa smiled faintly. “Memory seems to be my occupation now.”

They walked together into the forest. The cave was not what the world imagined. It was not crude stone or primitive shelter. It was architecture grown rather than built—curving walls shaped from reinforced composites and living rock, powered by silent energy systems designed to disappear into the landscape. Light filtered naturally from above, reflecting off water channels that fed into the forest below. A place that respected silence.

“This is temporary,” Chingsanglakpa said, gesturing to the final calibration console. “You could choose something else. A city. A role.”

Keibukeioiba shook his head. “The city looks at me and sees decision. The forest looks at me and sees balance.”

He paused, then added, “Balance is harder.”

Chingsanglakpa nodded. “It always is.”

They sat near the cave’s entrance as evening descended, the sky above Mount Laimaton shifting through colours no algorithm could name.

“You are not alone now,” Chingsanglakpa said. “Not in the way you were before.”

Keibukeioiba considered this. “No,” he agreed. “But solitude is different from abandonment.”

He turned to Chingsanglakpa fully.

“You did not give me Thabaton,” he said calmly.

Chingsanglakpa’s chest tightened. “I failed you.”

Keibukeioiba studied him for a long moment, then shook his head.

“No,” he said. “You gave me the truth before it destroyed me. That is not failure.”

The words settled between them, easing a weight Chingsanglakpa had carried since Leimakhong.

“You are my mentor,” Keibukeioiba continued. “Not my keeper. Do not confuse the two.”

Chingsanglakpa laughed softly, the sound edged with relief. “I will try.”

The return of the stolen materials took place without spectacle. Japan’s gold reserves reappeared in secure vaults across the country within a single night, accompanied by data signatures no known transport method could explain. Iranian enriched uranium was restored under international supervision, its chain of custody miraculously intact. No demands were made. No statements issued. The message was unmistakable. The world recalibrated again—this time with humility. In the quiet aftermath, intelligence agencies turned their attention to what remained unresolved.

The Nexus had not been dismantled. Its carrier had vanished during the chaos following the Mars launch, slipping through layered distortions that defied pursuit. Data fragments recovered from abandoned nodes painted a disturbing picture—not of a single organisation, but of a **conglomerate**.

Neural-implanted superhumans.

All born in the same facility.

All engineered for obedience.

All escaped together.

The Nexus Chief survived. Somewhere, he watched the world celebrate a guardian while preparing something far more patient.

Chingsanglakpa reviewed the intelligence alone late one night, the Puya manuscripts spread before him like an unfinished map. "They won't stop," he said quietly. Keibukeioiba, standing at the cave's threshold, did not turn. "No," he agreed. "Nor should they."

Chingsanglakpa frowned. "You say that as if it's acceptable." Keibukeioiba glanced back, eyes reflecting starlight. "Predators test boundaries. Guardians redefine them."

The forest stirred, wind moving through leaves in slow agreement.

"You will be called again," Chingsanglakpa said. "The world will need you."

Keibukeioiba nodded once. "And when it does, I will answer."

He paused.

"But not as a weapon."

Chingsanglakpa closed the manuscripts gently. "As what, then?"

Keibukeioiba looked out over Mount Laimaton, over land that had survived forgetting and remembrance alike.

"As what I have always been," he said.

"A watcher at the edge of human ambition."

Far away, in a hidden facility stitched together from stolen technology and resentment, the Nexus Chief stood before a chamber filled with figures suspended in light. They were many. Their eyes opened in unison. "The experiment continues," he said softly.

Outside, the stars burned cold and indifferent. And in a forest that listened, something ancient lifted its head—not in alarm, but in readiness. The demon would rise again. But so would the guardian.

-END-