

KEEPER 181

Chapter 181: HIS PERFORMANCE

"Sagiri, present," he said, and there was silence as even the cadets who had started to stand sat back down. Now one had seen him arrive or move, but somehow he was standing at the centre.

Silence tore through the place loud enough to make squad 25 alert, and they broke into a run.

"The examiners paused and looked towards the innkeeper.

"The cadet was late, but he was not yet eliminated. The exam begins!" he announced with a bit of excitement, and sagiri did not like it at all. Even his lengthy introduction was not called for. Even so, now more than ever, Sagiri had let the cold part of his heart take over. He had managed to push it back by the warmth caused by those around him, but right after what he had witnessed happening to his clan, he did not want to ever feel warmth. He welcomed the cold so it seeped into his heart, and the cold made him feel calm. Perhaps the warmth had just been a hindrance for him to face the reality of how cruel people really were.

He pulled out two of his blades. He should have been a little wary of the thousand eyes on him if there was any other way, but this time, he felt nothing. He opened his hands wide with the blades in his hand in a graceful yet cold move. The move was to signal the start of the dance. He breathed in and paused to announce the start before he breathed out and moved. The moves did not feel foreign as they always had.

He now knew and remembered who created the dance and its upgrades and improvements through the years. How the dance had been modified over the years till it had become what it was now. It was a part of history that the echo had kept, and now he did not need to remember each dance. He did not need to be careful of how far his stance fell because he now knew how far his stance should be.

He felt calm as he retracted the blades, carefully cutting the air in a swift move before he fell into another attacking stance. The dance was now as easy as breathing with adrenaline and the archive powering his veins. He had grown stronger than he could ever have imagined, and if people thought he was a freak before, now, if he displayed half of what he was capable of, they would call him either a monster or an anomaly.

Even so, just as he felt calm, his blades felt calm too. He was beginning to understand what senior instructor Bekuro meant when he said that a blade was not only a weapon but an extension of its wielder's will. Each motion flowed into the next with quiet precision, crossing arcs, measured strikes, and seamless transitions. The blades landed where they should, sank, withdrew, and continued.

There was no hesitation in the way they moved in his hands and no tension holding him back. Even when he completed and braced himself to start a new one, the transition was so smooth it was gracefully aggressive. The first dance came to an end, and he only paused for a split second to withdraw two more blades before he fell into stance again. He lifted his hands to cross against his chest, making the blades protrude from under his elbows. It was the stance to begin the second dance. The stance to begin the first dance was to show a beginner's openness, but the second stance showed that the dancer finally understood the strength of a blade and its personality.

Two blades in each hand felt lighter than usual, and he did not have to think of dropping one. The blades lay between his fingers gently. He breathed, and when he breathed out, the second dance flowed from his bones and mind and memory. The second dance is sharper than the first. Sagiri's hands split into layered motion, one striking while the other followed, alternating patterns that overlapped without clashing. His body turned with them, stepping through angles effortlessly, every strike landing with exact placement.

He didn't need to concentrate because he already knew his next move and executed it before the first had a chance to end. He threw the blades in the air simultaneously and spun around, catching each one. The goal of this move was to show the prowess of the warrior in blade handling, and here, a warrior was allowed to show their skill and added moves to wow the crowd. The man who first danced with the blades was a man of style, and Sagiri merged with his moves. He caught the first two in the fast spin in each hand. He allowed himself to fall backwards, which allowed him to catch the third blade's handle between his teeth and the fourth between his boots before he released it in a jump. The blade rose a few feet in the air before it landed in the hip strap with sagiri bending sideways to allow for the smooth action. The move was dangerous indeed, and everyone gasped.

Sagiri did not pause for a moment this time, and he retrieved the third pair of blades. The third dance was meant to show the beginning of complete understanding of the blades, and it showed both the intention and the grace of the blade. It was faster, more aggressive to kill, and harsh to show the protection of the wielder. His movements sharpened further, six blades moving in perfect coordination, high, low, center, cutting through the sequence with increasing speed. The pattern tightened and intensified. Sagiri pushed himself to achieve utter perfection of the dance like the first man who had achieved its perfection. He was unbeatable in the dance, and he added to it and elevated it to what it is now. The man who was first to understand the blade.

Of course, the final move was to throw the blades in the air, catch them at once, and launch them at the human-shaped mud dummies. All this was supposed to be performed with excellent accuracy, and Sagiri was ready to deliver both. At the last move, he released the six blades simultaneously. He twisted his body in the air, not needing a boost to jump high this time to meet the blades mid-air. He caught the first, the second, the third, and the fourth. For the fifth and the sixth, he twisted his body again and landed a kick on one while he was still mid-air. He landed on the same leg and kicked the last blade with his other leg, sending them accurately to the heart of the mud dummies.

He landed on bent knees and moved on his knees in a circle so quickly it looked like he was pivoting on something, and when he stopped, the remaining four blades were flying towards the hearts of the remaining four mud dummies. His combat suit was still crisp when he finally stood, except for the two stab holes on top of his head, even with the dust hanging on it and the dust that rose from his quick movements on a ground that had been assaulted by more than a thousand feet all day.

Sagiri held the position for a heartbeat. Then withdrew eight blades from his straps. Four on each hand.

Silence followed.

The examiners paused in their movements again as they went to reach for the score tags.

The third dance was the limit for a high school student, yet sagiri had just withdrawn more blades