

KEEPER 211

Chapter 211: ESCAPE

Sagiri remained still in the darkness. Even his eyes remained closed in the moment. He did not know whether to laugh or cry at how things had turned out or how they were going. It had been only four days since he talked to Senraki and Salka. He did not know whether this was what Senraki meant by fear could work to his advantage.

That, he would find out soon enough.

"We first have to get him out of the Galka War Academy," Senraki said. Turns out there were underground passages within Galka Academy. sagiri had always thought that Galka Academy looked like a war fortress in the past before it became an academy. Salka had agreed to show them one. It was the one at the back of the cave that looked perfect, like a rock. Of course, this man could not come with them or talk Lira out of it. That was the name of the girl. She bore one name, just like sagiri. Salka still did not like that sagiri was walking with the enemy, but even he and Senraki could not do much at that point. He was being haunted, and if they kept standing for long, not even Salka and Senraki could get him out.

The turns led to the eastern side of the wall, and with how rocky and damp it was, the two were lucky not to find any grave scale in it. If sagiri could guess. They were in the dark cave for at least the tunnel for three hours. It was treacherous and hard to walk in, and it was with the help of Sagiri's right eye that they were able to navigate the place. According to Salka, they were to remain in the tunnel till nightfall to move. During the day, it would be hard to evade the warriors that were now swarming not only Galka, but every inch of the roads, woods, and villages was being watched carefully. During the night, however, Sagiri had at least a chance to slip through and avoid them using his sensory abilities.

Lira had been mostly silent during the walk, and Sagiri had never been much of a talker unless it was completely necessary, and thus, the journey was silent. Perhaps if she had not been tampered with, she could have had a different personality, but the damage was already done. After nightfall, Sagiri and the girl finally left the tunnel, which had spat them out just outside the walls of the academy. They seemed to have emerged from within the roots of an ancient tree. No one could have guessed a tune to be in such a place.

Senraki had asked them not to head to Galka City at all costs and instead to go even further north before going west. Since what they were looking for was in the west. Sagiri could perceive all warriors and beasts on the way, but all he had to do was avoid them by a few hundred feet, and they could remain unseen. Lira was agile, fast, and stealthy, and the two did not have trouble avoiding most of the

patrolling warriors. When they could avoid them well, they could stay hidden in total silence until they moved before continuing.

It took them almost the entire night to get all the way north at top speed. Lira had not complained of tiredness. Not once, and Sagiri had not offered their rest. This was not the time for them to rest. At some point, Sagiri had passed two blades to her. Further north, the place was even further from civilization, and the forest was thick and more treacherous. They would try to avoid all beasts as much as possible, but it was impossible to avoid all of them. Being that further north brought fond memories for Sagiri. Especially when he and Salka's team had to tame the tree snakes only to run into another enemy. The first time, he and Nokai had also acted as one. Nokai stirred at the fond memory.

Even so, Sagiri did not have time to sit and reminisce. When daylight finally broke, that's when they stopped. There was no sign of patrolling warriors further north. Sagiri was right. Salka was right. They could not think him to have gone further north, at least they won't search it until they have covered the more habitable places. So they had till nightfall to clear out the place. And be further north west by the end of the day. Or at least try. Sagiri could hear a running stream where they had stopped. The two did not have to talk before they headed there. They needed to quench their thirst and at least eat something. The stream was clear and untouched, and after they drank their fill, Sagiri jumped inside to scrape away the blood that had dried on his combat suit and to cool his skin for a bit. Lira's misty grey pupils looked at him with the same barren expression, but she did not say anything or join him.

Lighting a fire was out of the question, so after the two drank enough to quench their thirst and Sagiri soaked in silence for a few minutes, Sagiri finally spoke.

"We find wild fruits to eat. We can't hunt and light a fire here," Sagiri said, and the girl just nodded and followed behind him. Sagiri was beginning to think that whoever sent her after him had tried to turn her into some sort of hunting beast or a dog that obeyed its master's will. Now she was following him around like a lost puppy of some sort. They did not have time to search, but Sagiri knew that some wild fruits only grew close to some kind of trees, and so he steered them in that direction. They took a minute to pluck and eat, and even carried a few in their pockets.

A few minutes later, their journey northwest began. There might not have been civilization further north of Galka for thousands of vaara, but they would be sure to break into civilization at some point if they kept going west. Sagiri was moving faster than he had ever done, but the girl still managed to keep up. He was going slow by the archive's standards, but if he moved that fast, then she could lose him, no doubt. The wound on his side had long recovered now. After soaking in the water on the stream for a few minutes, he was sure to have killed the smell of blood that had been hanging on him. At nightfall, the two finally broke away from the woods, and the trees started to look a bit normal. Normal in a way that perhaps some hunters came through to hunt, but did not dare go much deeper.

After three more hours of running, they could see a light. Some peculiar tribes still preferred to live further from civilization and not care about matters of Tagayia. This made them hostile to outsiders, but Sagiri did not know whether to be relieved or worried. Relieved that they might not recognize the Galka, and the Yalami academy uniform, and worried that they could start a fight.

Only one way to find out.

Chapter 212: ESCAPE II

Passing through the Haza tribe was not as hard as Sagiri had thought. Most of the place was asleep now, and the only light they had seemed to have been coming from the central house of the village. The house of their chief, perhaps. Turns out that they had been holding their moon catching festival earlier in the night to prepare for the hunting season. It was the only day they could sleep at night and not go hunting. The smell of burnt meat filled the air, even long before the two entered the village, making Sagiri salivate. He could hear Lira swallow loudly, too. Wild fruits were barely enough to keep them full.

"Wait!" Sagiri said when the girl started moving to the moon circle at the centre, where large fires had been, without a second thought. They must have eaten their fill and left some sticks of meat still hanging on top of the now dying fires. Sagiri pushed his senses out and listened to the sound for a long while. Only steady heartbeats greeted him. The place was asleep. Even so, Sagiri did plan on dillydallying and being caught. Some of the still primitive tribes who did not want to leave the old ways could be very hostile to outsiders, and Sagiri did not want to leave a trail of bodies behind him.

"Now!" Sagiri said, and the two moved into the moon circle deliberately drawn by the circle of dying fire. The remnants of the burnt meat were mouth-watering, especially after a day and a night without proper food. They settled into the place and started tearing into the roasted meat. The meat must have been the wild deer. They have the sweetest meat known to the tongue, and their hunger made it ten times sweeter. Within minutes, they had made a noticeable dent in the leftover meat, and they were nowhere near full. Sagiri paused and listened for some time. The place was still silent, and he continued eating. It was good to eat their fill because they could not be sure when they could come across another satisfying meal.

The warriors of Tagayia should have been dispatched further north by now, and those from all the Galka headquarters should have tightened the security, too. Sagiri was sure General Felunka could not pass up the opportunity either. Senraki had told him that even the mandra had just entered in time to witness him go berserk that morning, and since he was the highest power present, he would have to take action in some way to protect the people of Tagayia. To put it shortly, he had a little window to find his benefactor and kill him before he ran south. His mission should have changed after he found out his parents were safe and sound, but the water had already spilled over, and spilled water could not be

gathered. He now more than ever wanted to kill the man, find the lab where he was creating monster children, if there remained any, and burn it to the ground before going south.

Sagiri must have been lost in thoughts for so long that he missed a heartbeat fastening. It was the chief's door springing open that brought him back to earth. The man was holding a bow and arrow. The bow was small and the arrow even smaller. The Haza tribe was known for their small bows and arrows, mostly. It was not the size that mattered, but the lethal poison that coated the arrowhead. It was enough to put down a grown elephant. The Haza tribe people were also known to be short, and even being the chief, the man still stood a foot shorter than Sagiri.

Before Sagiri could react, the man made a strange sound from his throat. Like a call before he released the arrow. Sagiri could have easily evaded the arrow, especially after being trained by the most agile man in battle, Salka, but before he could move, a blur passed in front of him and snatched the arrow before throwing it aside.

Lira

The girl was already fast, but to defend against the attack, she was even faster. The more sagiri spent time with her, the more he began to get more confused. First, she tries to kill him, then her touch cools him, then she now protects him. And that feeling he had felt when her hands connected with his face. There was something about her. She was not as simple as an assassin sent after him. Perhaps the man behind her had not realised she was more than that, or he could not have sent her after him. Protecting him was by far the most surprising thing that had happened.

She turned to Sagiri, and Sagiri could feel her confusion. She, just like the last time she had rushed to him when he was burning up, did not realize what she had done until she had done it. She did not know why she had moved to touch him back then at the cave, as if she knew her touch and energy inside of her could cool his pain. Right at the moment, she must have also moved in the same way to protect him.

Just who and what was she?

Even so, Sagiri did not have time to ponder about it because after the sound that man made, the heartbeats had started growing more rapid and awake. They needed to get away first.

"Move!" he snapped, though Lira was already gone. She knew what had to be done before he even asked. They moved away from the circle of huts before they plunged into the woods behind them. They

had to keep going west, that was not changeable, even if they had to pass through the jaws of a lion. Wood splintered beside Sagiri's head as he dropped low, twisting mid-step.

Another arrow came. The sound of doors being thrown open and footsteps sounding behind them was now clearer. The haza were out for blood. Such a small but cruel tribe. Arrows tore through leaves, slammed into trunks, sliced past Sagiri and Lira close enough to cut, but that was a mistake they could not afford. They dodged as fast as possible, using the trees to hide or protect themselves when needed. They had to dodge while they moved. And fast.

Lira spun, her foot barely touching the ground before she pivoted again, body folding and unfolding like she had no bones. An arrow grazed her sleeve, black liquid smeared across the fabric, hissing faintly.

Poison.

"Don't let them touch you!" Sagiri barked, already sprinting again. He took a sharp turn to avoid a dozen incoming arrows. His boots skidded against damp earth as he dropped, rolled, and came up running. Three arrows struck where his chest had been a heartbeat ago.

Another hiss of an arrow followed. The Haza had lived in these lands, and they hunted at night. It was safe to say that they were in their element. He tilted sideways, spine bending just enough for a shaft to pass his face. Sagiri grabbed Lira's arm and yanked hard. They crashed through a low branch, splinters tearing at their clothes as arrows shredded the space they'd just occupied. The two were moving so fluidly as if they had fought together before. Even when they had to block the arrows with their blades, they did it so seamlessly without getting in each other's way. That was not the only thing Sagiri noticed. When he couldn't block first enough, she did, and vice versa.

"Too many!" Lira yelled.

"I know," answered

"We are being herded!" Lira suddenly yelled. She sure didn't talk much, but she did talk now as she analyzed the situation. Sagiri had realized the same. The arrows launched at them weren't random. They were being herded, and if they continued dodging and going the same way, soon they could be cornered.

"Right!" he snapped.

They broke direction instantly without speaking. Somehow, they knew where they should go to break the headlock. Lira let out a sharp breath as she ducked, spun, and kicked off a tree trunk, flipping over a low spray of incoming shafts. She landed wrong, given the tight angle and attacks she had evaded, but recovered instantly and kept running. Sagiri followed, faster now, pushing harder, breath steady despite the chaos.

Between the chaos, Sagiri could hear a river. The river that separated the Haza tribe from the Haku. The haku. Without exchanging a word, the two made a run for it, and like they knew what they needed to do, they jumped into the deep waters at the same time. Sagiri had sparred and fought side by side with his squad before, but somehow, he couldn't help but feel that this was the most seamless team effort that he had ever seen.

The arrows didn't stop even long after they touched the water. The Haza people even made sure to chase them down the river and launch more arrows until the river outran them.

Chapter 213: AFFECTION?

If they let the Haku River keep carrying them, it would definitely bring them close to the Achi tribe, which was even worse than the Haza. Their only option was to get out of the water farther west, just as it meandered northwest. Sagiri planned to keep walking at the edge of the Haku tribe. Further south of Haku was the Bami, and even though the man-child was from Haku, the Haku were one of the strongest tribes of the north, and they were honourable. Surviving near the Bami for so many years had to show how tough a tribe they were. Where the haku failed in strength, like the bami, their agility made up for it. They also kept mostly to themselves and were honorable in battle, which perhaps was the reason they had survived at the border of Bami.

The two walked slowly, making sure to stay at the edge of the outer villages, which are more deserted. One thing was clear, however. When morning came, and they were still wearing the Galka Academy and the Yalami combat suit, they would be apprehended in minutes. The entire Bami tribes were made up of warriors, and even the elderly living at the edge of villages were still deadly warriors. The Bami tribe is also the richest in the north, followed by Haku, then Lofekeni.

Sagiri was beginning to miss more and more the uninhabited lands. Now they were moving even slower, and he did not know how long it was going to take. The two would need to rest at some point, too. The Haku was indeed rich and sophisticated. What bad fate had befallen the man-child that he had fallen into such a dark path? He was also very good in battle. The Haku, unlike the Bami, were most likely not to scorn him because of his body size and inability to grow. What hell had possessed him to leave such a

rich and sophisticated tribe and become a weapon in someone else's hand? Perhaps there was bound to be a black sheep in every herd.

The two ran at a slow pace at the edge of Haku until they saw a well-lit house that was at the edge of a small village. Even the houses at the edge of the villages still looked well-kept.

They knew what they had to do. By morning, their combat suits could stand out like a sore thumb. What attracted them, however, was not the lighting of the house but the fabric hanging outside. The Haku were known to be good at setting traps for protection, and the two moved slowly as they approached the house. They soon realised why the house was well lit by the union ceremonial coats hanging outside. One white to showcase the woman's innocence, which she would keep, and the black one of a man to show protection. He would protect her innocence, which was the meaning of the cultural fabric. Young couples loved to wear those around until at least three months had passed. Stealing them could mean a bad omen for the couple, but their young marriage was the least of Sagiri's concerns.

No one ever stole those, and this couple might be the first in history to lose their union coats. The bad luck from the couple must have followed them because things went south quickly right after they left the Haku tribe. It was almost morning now, and they were standing at the edge of the Haku tribe close to the bami border. The place was busy even that morning. The Haku were business-oriented, too, and so a small town had begun to grow at the edge of the Haku. Sagiri was beginning to feel hungry again. All the roasted meat that they had eaten back at the Haza tribe must have run out of the system again, and he was starting to feel tired.

The coats they were wearing drew attention to them quickly, and Sagiri did not know whether they had picked the worst disguise or the best. Young couples were always treated with high esteem in most clans, and even more so in the Haku. They were expected to have babies and continue their clans and their tribes' bloodlines. The two smiled politely at the elderly aunties and uncles who were looking at them with approval. Well, Lira smiled at them because Sagiri's face was still covered with a mask. He just tilted his head to show respect. The smile on Lira's face was the thing he was most interested in looking at. It was the oddest thing Sagiri had ever seen. It was as if the girl had never smiled in her life before. The smile looked eerie and scary, as if she were haunting the place.

Sagiri was not better when it came to smiling either, but he had never had to show his smile since he was always covered. He, however, knew what a kind smile looked like, and right at the moment, the girl was looking like she had hit her head when she was born. Everything she did was unnatural, but this was by far the most unnatural thing Sagiri had ever seen.

"Your smile is too wide. You are showing too many teeth," Sagiri said, furrowing his brows. Her smile could be the end for them if she kept it up. Lira turned to him, the smile on her face leaving for a moment before it was back again when an elderly lady smiled at her knowingly.

"What do you mean? Smiling helps calm people and make us look more relaxed," she said as if it were an order she was required to do.

"That is not the use of a smile," Sagiri refuted before he stopped and turned around. "Your smile does not look relaxed in the slightest. Sagiri now stood face to face with the girl. She was short, and he had grown taller in the past few months, so he had to stoop down slightly. Sagiri's index fingers rose, and he rested them at the edges of Lira's lips. He pushed her upper lip down, forcing her to close her mouth, before he tilted the edges of her mouth up again to give her a more natural, polite smile.

Sagiri had not realized what he had done, but soon gasps filled the place, and the aunties were smiling even more knowingly. Deep feelings of joy were flooding them, and the uncles were nodding in approval.

"Such a loving boy," one said with hearts in her eyes.

"He does make a good husband," a middle-aged man added.

"She is so lucky, he will for sure keep her innocence." Another said.

These young couples are always so hot-blooded. They don't shy from showing their affection publicly." Whispers started flying from all over, and Sagiri froze. They had totally misunderstood his actions, and he could not redeem himself.

Affection?

He took a step. Keep her innocence? Were they serious? The girl had tried to kill him, and he had still not scratched the possibility of killing her at some point. He had to remind himself that other people could not perceive emotions. Perhaps that was a good thing.

Chapter 214: WEB

Sagiri shot up in bed with a start. In a comfortable inn bed. Things had completely gone wrong, as you could imagine. After the supposed affectionate display, the two had been swallowed whole by the elderly vultures. It's not like Sagiri could kill them while they smiled and showered them with blessings for their marriage. Killing them would be cruel, and being stuck between the Haku and Bami would be troublesome.

Things had escalated from bad to worse after that. Besides the union trinkets they showered them with, they had been fed enough to feed a small village. Lira was eating too fast then, and the elders had scolded him for not feeding his young wife. The uncles had gone on to advise him on how to feed a wife, and the lectures had lasted decades. Those aunties could smell tiredness from miles away, and they had also accused him of tiring his young wife with too much of his youthful stamina. One thing led to another, and one inn owner offered them a place to rest when they said they were travelling to see other lands. That is how they ended up in an inn with an inn room special for couples.

They might have fooled everyone into thinking they were a couple, but sleeping on the same bed while not married was a taboo beyond all others. Sagiri had to stay out of the door and wait for Lira to use the inn's cleaning rooms before he did the same.

"You can have the bed," Sagiri said. Lira hesitated for a bit before sitting at the edge of the bed, her wide eyes looking at sagiri skeptically. "I will not kill you in your sleep. I will not do anything to dishonour you," Sagiri said in a curt statement. He might have never thought of marriage, but he knew what happened between couples through the medicine study. The human body was one of the units. Sagiri sat on the mat at the centre of the room and fell into a meditative position. He could have preferred that they leave already, but he somehow had the feeling that those aunties and uncles would lecture him for another decade on being a negligent husband, and it would not be too far to think that they were sitting outside the inn watching. All he could do was sigh and wait a few hours to pass before they moved out.

The girl fought her sleep for a while, but it was only natural after being fed that much that the body would fail you. It'd been three days since Sagiri had slept or rested. The unsteady breaths of Lira soon turned steady, and she passed out, breathing softly. Sagiri snapped his eyes and looked at her from his position on the floor. She looked peaceful now that she was not behaving like a half-human, halfpuppet. The sun had risen now. He walked to the windows and pulled the blinds shut. He pulled the extra cover from the bed slowly, not to wake her, and for an assassin, she did not even stir.

Sagiri wrapped his body in the covers but still maintained his meditative position on the floor. Being too full, too tired, and too comfortable was indeed a curse because no matter how much Sagiri fought to stay awake, he was too tired to put up much of a fight. He must have passed out at some point for a few minutes or hours. He didn't know.

He sprang awake in a pool of his sweat and darkness. He had been sprawled in a fatal position in his sleep with no care. How careless. It must have been the blinds, but he could tell it wasn't them cutting the light. It was already night. His blades were still on him. After catching his breath, he wheeled around to look at the bed, but there was nobody there. Where was Lira?

Lira was gone!

Sagiri shot up straight. He was disoriented, but he was well rested. He felt reborn and as if he could topple a nation. Even so, he could feel that something was eerily wrong. The place was too silent and too dark. He had made sure to keep his right eye closed while the aunties and uncles tore him to shreds with lectures, but now he did not need to. The inn was silent, and he could not perceive any other life for miles. It was as if everyone who ran the inns and the couple of dozen inns on the street had coincidentally closed down and gone home. It was silent. Too silent.

Odd.

Sagiri could not even perceive Lira. As if she had disappeared, too. How had he been so careless as to sleep? Sagiri pushed his senses even further out, but he could not hear or feel any sign of life. It was impossible that everyone could have just died or left. The archive stirring must have been the reason he had woken up. Perhaps he could have slept till it was day again. The markings on his body started crawling rapidly under his skin. Nokai stirred too, and Sagiri stood even more still, trying harder to perceive any movements. Nothing. Just stretched silence.

Walking through the corridors of the inn was not a choice anymore. Sagiri moved within the archive and landed on the roof of the inn. It must have been well before midnight or after. The sky was starless, and the moon seemed to be sleeping as well. The night was too dark. He could not stop the feeling that someone had cast a long web, and he was standing at the centre of it. Sagiri crouched on the roof, not daring to move. The silence was too thick, and the markings were crawling too much. It felt almost like he was being watched, yet even with his right eye, for as far as it tore through the darkness, all he could see were houses and no movements at all. Even the trees were still. Too still

It was only a matter of time before the silence could be broken. Something had to give after all, especially if he did not move. Perhaps whoever had woven the web was waiting for him to move so the noose could tighten. All he could do was wait.

Chapter 215: FIRST WEB

Silence. Silence stretched out for minutes, if not hours. It seemed this was a game of patience, and neither was willing to move first. The silence was unbearable. Suddenly, a thin sound tore through the air. It was thin, then it grew sharp and irritating. Sagiri was not wearing his seals, and the thin sound was the cruelest thing he had ever heard. To his ears, it was like torture. It felt like they were exploding.

His opponent must have come prepared. The sound rose higher and higher and higher, and Sagiri could not feel anything besides the agonizing, crippling white sound tearing at his sensitive ears. He fell on one knee, panting in agony. His hands rushed to his ears to cover them, but it was futile. Only his seals could stop all the noise. His hands came in contact with something wet.

Blood

They were trying to fry his eardrums. He had never found a way around his enhanced hearing. It was a blessing and a curse, but he had never found a way around it except the seals Bakuru gave him. Right at the moment they were in his pockets, yet he could not reach them. He could not move his hands from his ears to get them, but he knew he had to. With a pained groan, Sagiri pulled one hand from his ears, but he immediately put it right back as another wail of torture reached his ears.

As if the uneasiness was stirring everything inside of him all at once. Sagiri's skin began to burn slightly. Right. The blackrot residual had been silent in his body, only to act up when he was fighting not to collapse from the high-pitched ringing from all four corners of the small shopping centre. He could feel his skin begin to burn, and he knew if he it was only going to get worse. He could handle the backlash of the poison and the wailing noise at the same time; that was for sure. One thing had to give.

The markings on Sagiri's body crawled to his fists. He did not try to hide the glow of the marks this time, and they glowed violently. It took all of Sagiri's will and strength to jump off the roof and land on the ground. Only this time, he landed with his fists. He had grown even stronger than the last time he split the ground back at Ko'alsi City. His fist connected the ground with such force that a depression two feet deep and 20v wide formed. It did not stop even then. The ground shook and brought all the houses in the small place down, flattening them. Whatever innovations that were making the crippling wail must have been in range because the noise died down instantly.

Sagiri remained in the same position as he felt the hot liquid flow down his ears. He panted with his breath coming in rasps. He had not realised how much damage he had caused until he finally gathered the strength to stand up and saw that no house was standing. The place had been completely flattened, and he was standing in a long, very deep, and very wide depression. He was still wearing the union coats they stole from the young couple's house. It now blew behind him in the unfiltered air of the night. The

markings on his body had not seized and they were crawling under his skin like rings of fire. The black rot backlash was making them hotter.

The dust soon settled.

Now that the houses were and whatever his opponents had been using to hide their presence was gone. He could feel the hundred or more people scattered in the darkness. Only one set of special units had such capability and innovations to enable them to capture anomalies. Handle rare abilities research, develop magical weapon development, energy manipulation, arcade defence system, and most of all, as Lotaga said, they are also obsessed with Unusual power signatures, Unregistered anomalies, and individuals who "should not exist." The seventh wing. The Magical Warfare wing.

They were indeed not to be underestimated at all, but they angered Sagiri even more. They must have been the ones in cooperation with the fourth wing who captured Myama and tortured the beast to death. Myama could have flattened the war headquarters at any moment, but she didn't. He was not feeling as generous as Myama.

"Are you going to keep lurking and use your petty tricks?" Sagiri seethed after a moment of his opponents remaining still as if that could stop him from feeling their presence.

"Who said we are hiding?" A voice said before someone stepped forward. According to the decoration on his combat suit, he must have been the captain of the squad. It seemed they had dispatched several Squads, and his was the closest and fastest to arrive. If Sagiri could not perceive his feelings, he could have been filled by the air he was putting forth, but after his display, he could tell the man was more skeptical now about approaching him carelessly.

"Isn't the seventh wing supposed to be the third most deadly unit of tagayia, or is it the fourth?" Sagiri said, tilting his head. He did not wait for them to answer before he asked the next question. "Why do you need to hold a little girl without her consent?" Sagiri asked again.

He had felt her the moment their veil machines were shattered. She was being held down by two warriors.

"The girl refused to tell us where you were when we found her running. It seems she hates you, but still did not tell us where you were," the captain said. "Is she your girlfriend or are you two having a lovers'

squabble?" The man asked, looking at the union coat he was wearing. It looked like he was buying time or avoiding a fight, so he just kept yapping.

"What does it have to do with anything?" Sagiri sighed with irritation. Weren't they eager to just kill him and trap him by cornering him with their stupid tricks mere moments ago?

"We are here to escort you to the war headquarters. We will not harm your little girlfriend if you come willingly," the captain said, and Sagiri almost laughed at how ridiculous that sounded. A whole warrior unit of Tagayia was bargaining on the life of a girl to capture him. Weren't they supposed to protect her from him or something? The Northerners were indeed cruel.

"What makes you think I care if you kill her or not?" Sagiri breathed an irritated sigh.

Chapter 216: SECOND WEB

"What makes you think I care if you kill her or not?" Sagiri breathed an irritated sigh.

A moment of silence stretched before Sagiri spoke again.

"It is truly pathetic seeing warriors who are supposed to protect using the life of another to bargain," Sagiri said, shaking his head. The pain from the black rot coursing through his body was making him more irritable, and he did not have time to sit and chat. He needed to kill them quickly and find some water to jump into.

"Do you think I am bluffing?" the captain said in a threatening voice.

"Whether you kill her or not, you are dying here tonight. All of you are." Sagiri said, and he meant it.

"She is just my prisoner, and she tried to kill me first. What makes you think I care about someone who tried to kill me?" Sagiri sighed.

The air snapped, and tension rose. Suddenly, something moved beside Sagiri. He could have missed it if he were not using his right eye. Before he could move, however, the colourless thread wrapped his arm.

The binding thread?

Sagiri had learned about those in the central Pentagon library. It was not that they were a secret, but they were rarely used. They wrap around limbs instantly and tighten the more one moves. He didn't think they would move, and when he saw them, they were already tightening on both his hands, thin strands biting into his skin as they constricted.

His power surged and died.

"What?"

For a fraction of a second. His eyes widened.

No way.

He tore free, ripping the threads apart, but they didn't break clean. They resisted, like they were alive, clinging, draining. These were not the normal binding threads. This must have been special to the seventh wing and the fourth wing. They were used to bind anyone or any beast anomalies with magical power or any power of any kind. The chains used to shackle Myama must have been coated with whatever was in the binding strings. Sagiri wanted to wait and see how far they could bind him before reacting, but his skin was burning enough to roast raw meat till it was crisp.

The first thread came for his throat, thin and nearly invisible in the dark, but Sagiri caught it just in time and dropped low, his body twisting as it sliced through the space where his neck had been. He barely recovered before two more snapped toward him from opposite sides, forcing him to pivot sharply, his boots grinding against the uneven floor as he redirected his movement.

They weren't firing blindly. They were trying to close him in. So this is why the captain was yapping all along. He was trying to buy them time.

Threads began to layer over each other, crossing at precise angles, cutting off escape routes before he could even take them. Sagiri stepped forward and stopped abruptly as three lines formed in front of him, another dragging low toward his legs while one curled in from behind. For a brief moment, he didn't move, and he kept his head low.

"Nokai!" he called. The weapon had been pulsing violently with killing intent ever since he woke up, and it snapped free from the

Before the next thread reached him, it split cleanly in two. Nokai tore through the strings in a split second. They snapped, but before the wielders could pull them back or prepare for another attack, Nokai rested in his hand.

"This is irritating," Sagiri breathed. He moved instantly, stepping into the narrowing space from the dozens of threads coming at him. Nokai flashed once, slicing through two incoming threads before they could touch him this time. Another came for his side, fast and low, but he turned into it and cut it apart in the same motion, not wasting a single movement.

More followed. The air filled with them, threads weaving over and under each other, forming a tightening cage that adapted with every step he took. Sagiri didn't retreat. Instead, he pushed forward, his movements becoming sharper, more deliberate as he carved a path through them. One snapped toward his face, close enough that he felt it skim the air in front of his eyes, but Nokai rose in a precise arc and split it before it could touch him. Another wrapped toward his arm, attempting to coil and bind, but he shifted his weight and cut it before it closed.

They were getting more violent. The wielders did not want to lose the upper hand. His sleeve tore as one grazed past, and he felt the near miss, but he didn't slow. His breathing stayed steady, his focus narrowing as every step became calculated. The threads might not have been much to tame him, but they were a nuisance indeed coming from all directions as if they could smell the power in his body. He managed to hold his ground and have the upper hand, but then the pattern changed.

The wilders were ruthless, and it seemed that they had done this a thousand times before, and they had trained their formations to perfection. They did not leave any loopholes in their defence. The spacing widened, then tightened again from different angles as the operators adjusted, learning his rhythm and attempting to trap him faster than he could respond.

"Lock him!"

The command cut through the darkness. His attackers were strategically positioned in ten positions. A perfect circle. All of them shooting threads into a single point.

Him.

Sagiri stepped forward again. He jumped in the air and twisted his body. The dust around him rose. He swung Nokai around in circular motion, cutting the strings, but even when they were cut, the wielder

just unwound them, and they kept getting longer. The only way to get out of the stupid formation was to kill the wielders. With the power surging inside Sagiri, he roared in irritation and shot into the air. The threads followed him as he expected they could, but he was faster this time.

Nokai pulsed in his hand. The first man didn't react in time. Sagiri crossed the distance in an instant and cut through him in one clean motion, the blade passing through both weapon and body without resistance.

He didn't stop. As he went on an arch, the threads still followed him. The second turned too late, raising his launcher just as Sagiri reached him, but Nokai came down and split his head in half. The third tried to fire, but Sagiri cut the thread as it left the barrel, then followed through, finishing him before he could recover. The formation required all ten thread weavers to be perfect, and now it was crippled. They changed from attacking to defending themselves.

It was too late.

Sagiri moved along the edge of the circle they had built, his pace controlled, his movements precise as he dismantled them one by one. One tried to retreat, firing wildly in panic, but the thread split in mid-air before it could reach him, and Sagiri was already in front of him when it happened.

He cut his head clean off. They must not have expected him to move that fast, and there was a distinct smell of fear as he tore through all ten in a split second, not allowing them any chance for escape. By the time the last one understood what was happening, Sagiri was already standing inside the formation they had created. The man's grip trembled as he raised his weapon, hesitation finally breaking through his training.

"He is a monster!" The man's voice trembled

Sagiri stepped forward once.

Nokai flashed.

And it was over. The place fell silent as the threads that had managed to circle him lost tension and dropped lifelessly to the ground, one after another.

"Now, captain. Are you ready to join your comrades?" Sagiri said with a voice filled with humour. The pain inside of him was driving him mad, and the squad was going to pay for it.

Chapter 217: HAMMER FORMATION

"Kill him!!" the captain of the squad yelled. The seventh and fourth wing squads are much larger than the other squads because they deal with anomalies. Whether humans or beasts.

The killing intent in the place surged to an unbearable height and merged with Sagiri's. It made the place already starting to smell like death, cackle with the energy of the impending death. Only one of the two sides was going to make it out alive. The seventh wing squad was not going to stop until they captured or killed him. Their first two attempts to capture him had failed, and now they had clearly lost the upper hand to capture him, so the only thing to do was kill him. He had already killed ten of their thread weavers. It was only natural that they resorted to more extreme measures.

The squad was made up of a hundred and twenty warriors. They were further separated into smaller units of ten according to their specializations. The thread weaver unit was already gone, but there were eleven more highly trained units left.

The second unit is the Long-Range Suppressors squad. The unit falls at the far end of the formation.

They specialize in long-range fighting and are the last line of defense to make sure he doesn't escape. The third unit is the close-quarters combat unit who engage in direct combat. The Fourth unit is the heavy assault unit who engage in high-threat situations. This unit and the close combat squad would be the ones to make most contact with the enemy. The fifth unit is the nullifiers unit. They are equipped with special equipment like the wailing innovation that almost tore Sagiri's ears off. That was not the weapon they had, and they would offer support as much as possible to reduce the strength of the anomaly. The sixth unit is the ward innovators. Their duty is to make sure the battlefield does not expand too far, and they work closest to the long-range squad.

The seventh unit is the trackers. It was their duty to track anomalies and any magical signals. They must have been the ones to find Sagiri, but they are useless in battle. In dire circumstances, they would have to fight, however. The eighth unit is the stealth operative unit. They must have been the ones to clear the area and make sure no civilians were caught in the crossfire. They also must have been the ones to catch Lira. The ninth unit is the aerial support unit, and just like the thread weavers, they were at the moment weaving threads of their own further out, making sure he would escape through the air. Some anomalies and creatures in the fourth wing could fly or shoot through the air for long distances, like Sagiri. The tenth unit is the tactical command. They oversee battlefield strategy, communications, and synchronization of all units to ensure seamless execution of containment protocols. They were the heads of the smaller units.

The eleventh unit is the extraction, and just like their name, their duty is to transport anomalies back to the war headquarters. The last unit, of course, is that the combat healers and Sagiri still had mixed feelings about killing those. They are mostly from the east, and they managed to remind him of Rusha. Perhaps he could leave them with a few broken bones as a reward. They provide immediate medical support to operatives and ensure captured anomalies remain alive for research and interrogation. Their role was pretty harmless, but anyone who worked in the seventh wing was not innocent.

"Hammer formation!!" The captain of all the units gave the command again, and the units fell into tight formation.

The hammer formation is airtight, and just like its name, it's made to crush the enemy. The Hammer Formation is a coordinated assault strategy designed to overwhelm and capture a high-threat anomaly through synchronized pressure from multiple directions. Rather than relying on brute force, it combines suppression, containment, and close-quarters engagement to drive the target into a controlled "impact zone."

The formation is not to be underestimated at all. It is deadly, just like a hummer, and its structure is the same. The Anvil is the Frontline Engagement unit, which includes the Close-Quarters Fighters and Heavy Assault units. Their purpose is to engage the anomaly directly, forcing them to remain on the defensive and limiting their forward movement. The Hammerhead Flanking Strike includes the Stealth Operatives and thread weavers. It is their duty to strike from the sides at precisely timed intervals, exploiting any openings created by the Anvil. Their strength was now weakened without the thread weavers, and they were the weak link of the formation.

The Haft of the hammer is formed by the Long-Range Suppressors and Aerial, High-Ground Support. Their purpose is to maintain constant pressure from a distance, limiting Sagiri's escape routes and weakening his defenses by using their Suppression bolts, sedative rounds, and precision fire to herd the target. The Binding Core of the hammer formation involves the Nullifiers and Ward Engineers units. Their purpose is to create a containment field around the battlefield, dampening Sagiri's abilities and sealing off escape paths. They deploy nullification barriers and wards that tighten as the formation advances. Lastly, the Tactical Command, Trackers, Extraction & Medics would coordinate the operation, monitor the anomalies' power fluctuations, and prepare for immediate containment once he is subdued.

The squad fell into position in mere seconds. Sagiri could have attacked before they completed their formation, but where was the fun in that? His madness was growing by the second, and the sight of blood brought him bad memories. The combination made the darkness inside of him grow enough to cover the entire place. He was not fighting the darkness in him anymore, and he let it swallow him.

At the forefront, heavily armored fighters advanced in a steady line, shields interlocked, weapons raised. This was the Anvil, designed to meet Sagiri head-on and deny him any forward escape. Behind and between them, Nullifiers planted compact barriers into the earth. As each device activated, a faint hum spread through the clearing, and the air grew dense, pressing subtly against Sagiri's senses.

It was time to let the darkness inside of him have what it wanted. It had dared to take him over, and he had fought it in the past, but now, as his left pupil darkened just like that day in the woods when manchild and his squad had come for him, he let himself get lost in the violence. It was time to follow Senrakis's advice and rain terror. And to do that, he did not need any distraction of self.

High above and further out, silhouettes shifted into position along the treetops. Long-range suppressors leveled flaming arrows.

"Squads in formation!! Initiate Hammer Formation!!"

Chapter 218: BLOODY

Sagiri exhaled slowly, tightening his grip on Nokai. He could feel the pressure building from every direction, each squad moving with calculated intent. This was a precision execution, designed to leave him with no room for escape. A moment of silence went by after the command before all hell broke loose.

A barrage of suppression bolts tore through the air, forcing Sagiri into motion. He pivoted sharply, Nokai flashing as he deflected one projectile and narrowly avoided another. Before he could recover, the frontline fighters closed the distance, their shields slamming into position as they attempted to pin him in place.

Sagiri stepped forward instead of retreating.

His blade carved a precise arc, slipping through the narrow gap between two shields and forcing the formation to stagger. But the momentary opening was anticipated. From both flanks, stealth operatives surged in, their weapons aimed to exploit the distraction. He twisted, barely avoiding a strike that would have crushed his ribs, and countered with a swift cut that sent one attacker to the ground. Yet even as he moved, the formation adjusted. The Nullifier weapons intensified their hum, and Sagiri felt a subtle resistance against his movements, as if the air itself sought to restrain him.

Even with the intense fight, Sagiri did not miss the pain that suddenly flared in his side, accompanied by the black rot festering pain, and he almost staggered back. They had managed to bruise him even with his fast attacks and defences. Every action demanded perfection. A single misstep would mean capture or death.

The Hammer tightened. They were hellbent on cornering him. That was a fact.

Heavy assault fighters pressed forward, attempting to drive him back toward the containment zone while long-range suppressors continued their relentless fire, herding his movements with terrifying accuracy. Each time Sagiri created an opening, another squad was already in position to close it.

But Sagiri adapted just as quickly. He was a student of the best fighter in Tagayia, or one of the best. There was no way they could corner him. Salka was like a squad of a hundred men by himself, so this was like going against Salka. Time to get more serious.

Sagiri moved with lethal precision, slipping through the smallest gaps, his blade striking only when necessary, each motion calculated to disrupt the formation's rhythm. Nokai flashed again and again, forcing the Anvil to fracture momentarily before it reassembled with mechanical efficiency. The battle became a deadly dance of strategy, instinct, and discipline against unpredictability, coordination against individual mastery.

A close-quarters fighter lunged a fraction too early. They must have been expecting him to attack them at full force, but Salka was indeed a good teacher. It was a false attack on Sagiri's side, and when they attacked at full force, he jumped back before attacking again. They expected a false attack again, but only a fool repeats a move twice.

Sagiri seized the moment.

He pivoted, using the attacker's momentum to break the shield line, and for an instant, the Hammer faltered. The command unit reacted immediately, issuing rapid adjustments to restore the formation, but the brief disruption was enough to shift the tempo of the fight. Steel met armor. Suppression fire scorched the earth. The hum of nullification fields clashed with the sharp whistle of blades cutting through the night air.

Neither side could afford a mistake. Because in this battle, perfection was the only path to survival.

Sagiri, however, must have pushed himself too far and underestimated his madness and the darkness inside of him because as they launched the next attack, he blacked out. It was not in a manner of him taking a backseat in his own body.

He did not remember what followed. There were only fragments, fleeting sensations without context. The cold weight of Nokai moving through the air. The faint resistance of steel to armor. The scent of iron thickened around him. Distant screams that felt disconnected, like echoes from a dream. Then stillness. Distant stillness and silence.

When awareness finally returned, it did so slowly and painfully. His eyes snapped open as if he had been in deep slumber. What just happened? Sagiri inhaled sharply, as though surfacing from deep water. The clearing was unnaturally still. No commands echoed through the place. No weapons were being fired at him. Even the night insects seemed to have fallen silent. The first thing he noticed was the smell.

Blood.

It saturated the air, heavy and metallic. His gaze dropped to the ground. Bodies lay scattered across the clearing, their once-perfect formation reduced to a silent testament of devastation. The Hammer Formation of one hundred and ten operatives of the Seventh Wing had been utterly annihilated. Confusion tightened in his chest.

"What... happened?" he whispered. No one answered. He was not expecting an answer, and it was more like he was thinking loudly. He had a feeling he knew what had happened, but he did not want to acknowledge it. Then he realized that Nokai was still raised. A slight intent to kill still clung to it. The end of one side of the blade was poised at someone's throat. Sagiri's breath caught as his eyes followed the blade to its target.

Lira.

She was kneeling, frozen before him, her back slightly arched to avoid the edge pressing against her skin. A thin line of red marked where the blade kissed her neck. Her eyes were wide, with fear, and now it was mixed with something else, a mixture of fear and heartbreaking relief.

"Sagiri," she said softly, careful not to move. "It's me."

Horror surged through him. His hand trembled as the reality of the situation settled in. He had no memory of raising the blade, killing everyone, and no recollection of turning it toward her.

"I..." His voice faltered. "Did I... do this?" he had planned to kill them all, but somehow it scared him that he did not remember how he did it, and more so, if he could have killed her too, or, far worse, someone closer to him, without knowing in that state. Lira swallowed gently, her gaze flickering briefly to the carnage surrounding them before returning to him.

"You killed them all. They did not stand a chance against that 'you'" she replied, her tone calm despite the tension. Her fear was evident when she said 'that you' however. The words struck him with devastating weight. Sagiri's grip weakened, and he slowly pulled Nokai away from her throat, lowering the blade as if it had suddenly become unbearably heavy.

He took a step back, his eyes scanning the clearing once more. The magnitude of the destruction was undeniable. Every operative who had come to capture him now lay motionless, their precision and discipline rendered meaningless.

A tremor ran through him. He was not regretting his actions, but he was not fully proud of them now. He wanted a fair fight to the death, but this did not look like it. Once he blacked out, they did not stand a chance.

Sagiri looked down at Nokai, its surface reflecting his image, distorted by the blood that clung to it. The silence of the forest pressed in around them, heavy with the consequences of what had transpired.

Sagiri looked down at Nokai, its surface reflecting his image distorted by the blood that clung to it. The blood was disappearing slowly. Nokai never carried the memory of its assaults, yet this was taking time to disappear. The silence of the place pressed in around them, heavy with the consequences of what had transpired.

He had survived the Seventh Wing's assault. Yet he could not remember any of it. Sagiri tried to access the archives' memories of the incident, but the archive had gone silent. Even the markings on his body had stopped stirring. He could not access the echo archive.

That was not the only thing that was going wrong at the moment.

Chapter 219: COMPLICATIONS

It had been at least two hours after Sagiri wiped out an entire seventh wing squad and its twelve units. In that period, one more thing had gone completely wrong. The backlash from the black rot was causing him immense pain. He had already felt the archive go silent, and true to the matter, he had depleted all his strength. There was no more strength left in his body. Nokai had naturally retracted, and it was now lying silently in his hip strap. Sagiri had decided not to go further south or step into the Bami lands. Their only option was to head back north a little, then continue west. In his weakened state, Sagiri was convinced that even a Bami tribe toddler could tear him to shreds.

Lira was walking silently behind Sagiri. There was no spring of water nearby, and in the two hours they had only to pull themselves from the Haku tribe's lands into the nomans' land, separating them from another tribe. Sagiri and Lira walked deeper into the woods, and at that moment, Sagiri could not go on any longer, and he sat by a tree and rested his back against it. His insides were burning so badly, and the skin on his limbs was almost gone. To put it lightly, he was in agony. So much agony he could wail, but he didn't. Instead, he shut his eyes.

"You have always wanted to kill me. This is your chance," Sagiri said after a moment.

Lira had been standing there silently, back to the opposite tree. Her eyes had not left him for a moment. Sagiri knew the girl could sense his weakness now, and he was beginning to wonder why she hadn't killed him yet. Silence stretched, and the girl did not answer.

"This is your only chance to kill me. I might kill you when I get back my strength. Killing me now would do you good," Sagiri insisted. He had felt the girl's fear on several occasions now, and when his blade was held to his throat, he could feel her crippling need to live and her fear.

"When I touched you..." Lira began to speak, but Sagiri's eyes snapped open.

"Don't you dare finish that sentence. I would never share those ties with a Northerner. Especially one who almost killed me," Sagiri snapped, and Lira snapped her lips shut.

"I don't have the feeling to kill you right now. I don't know why I..." Lira said before she slid down and onto the forest ground. She had been going in and out of the state several times. Being cold and warm as if she was switching from whatever they made of her in that monstrous lab to a real person. Her real self. It was clear she did not know what was going on with her, and her remembering that hell was also something she could not pull past. It was only right to say they were both fighting something at the

moment. One was split between her identity, and another was burning alive from the backlash of the residual poison. She did not look like she was in a state to kill him, but Sagiri was not willing to bet on that for long. The backlash was weaker than the first time it happened, but the pain was still unbearable.

The pain kept growing more and more until Sagiri could not take it anymore, and he must have passed out at some point. When he came to, the sun was moving towards the centre of the sky. After a moment of trying to remember where he was, Sagiri shot to his feet, frantically looking around. He must have fallen unconscious in the wee hours of the morning, and now, if he could guess by the position of the sun, it was only two hours shy of noon. He must have been out for at least six hours.

Six hours?

By now, the place he had laid carnage must have been discovered. Had he slept through flares being fired? It was sure that killing an entire seventh-wing squad could draw attention. Not only that, but the place had also been flattened. No house or vendor's stall was left standing. A place like that could not be hidden, and hell was bound to break loose. The cuts on their body would no doubt link him to the killings. How could he have fallen asleep with such odds? If he could subtract the few hours of silence before the first person walked into the carnage, then in the past three hours or four, the search for him had been launched.

Those searching for him would have to be very cautious after witnessing what he had done, and so they could not just look for him carelessly. That perhaps was the only reason he had not been caught yet. They must have been coming up with a plan to corner him, and to do that, they must have dispatched the strongest warriors of Tagayia. That could mean even the fourth wing might have to give a hand. Even so, Sagiri knew his window was getting narrower now. He tried to push his senses out to perceive his surroundings, but he couldn't. The archive was deadly silent. He had never not been able to perceive his surroundings before, and that realization was not one he liked.

Now of all times.

Lira was nowhere to be found, just like the previous night. She must have run away yet again. That was the least of Sagiri's concerns. He would catch up at a later time. Right before he could break into a run, however, the leaves above him rustled, and someone jumped through. Lira had been above him all the while, and he had not perceived her. Thanks to the archive for acting shy at the moment. Sagiri could tell that the residual poison in his system was almost gone now, but he still needed a few days for it to be completely gone. Days he did not have at all.

Lira was munching on some wild fruits. She handed one to Sagiri, and he did not know what to think of it.

"Put that away, we need to move," Sagiri said. The girl acted like a child sometimes. It was as if she had not left her naive child phase, yet she became an assassin. The monsters who made her did not teach her much about many social things. Not that Sagiri had been any better before, but just watching her, sometimes, he did not know whether to laugh. He could not imagine that it was the same girl who had almost killed him.

Even when not depending on the archive, Sagiri had grown stronger on his own, but right at the moment, he was weak. His body was weakened by the backlash of the black rot and the archive from his rampage. The two were not moving as fast as Sagiri would have liked, but it was not like he had a choice. He was now crippled, and he didn't know how long he had before elite squads would be on top of him.

He also had a feeling that this time they would not hold back.

Chapter 220: THE SHADOW UNIT

Even moving at the painfully slow pace, no one had come after them yet, and it was almost sun now. Sagiri's condition had not improved in the slightest. They had been moving at a slow pace. Sagiri had regained his heightened hearing, but his sensory ability was still lacking. His strength had not improved much, and the archive was still silent.

A few hours before sundown, however, Sagiri got a sinking feeling in his heart. No matter how much he listened, he could not hear anything for miles, yet he could not do away with the feeling that someone was watching him. Watching them. It was like the forest had suddenly grown a set of eyes. The feeling grew thicker when darkness fell. It seemed Lira had felt it too.

"It is too silent," she said, coming to a stop behind Sagiri, who had finally stopped. He closed his eyes and listened harder, but not even the birds were singing. There was no way such a green forest could lack small creatures. The two started moving more slowly again and stopping in intervals. Anytime they stopped, they pressed their backs against each other and watched each other's backs.

The feeling got even more intense when darkness suddenly fell on the horizon. It was as if the very shadows were watching him. Nokai had not stirred, nor had the archive. They had not recovered from whatever was crippling them. Dang it!

Both sagiri and Lira had their blades drawn this time. Sagiri tightened his grip on his two blades. He wished Nokai could wake the hell up, and the archive could stir, but they both remained silent.

"Show yourselves?" he called to the darkness, though he already knew they wouldn't.

Something was telling him a unit had caught up with him, and he had a feeling this unit, unlike the event wing squad, was more deadly, and they were not here to only capture him but kill him. Another disturbance and blur circled them. In the dark, it just felt like wind had blown by them, but Sagiri knew the wind had carried someone with it. Another one circled them mere moments later. This time, he moved instantly, swinging his blades in a precise arc aimed at the source.

The blade cut through empty air.

A heartbeat later, a second strike landed, slicing across his side. The attack had come from the opposite direction. A cut had been rendered to his side. It was not deep, but the precision and manner in which it had been executed were scary. They were not merely fast but also unreadable. There was only one unit that was capable of such, and Sagiri very well knew about them. Sagiri steadied his breathing, forcing himself to remain calm as he analyzed the pattern. There were multiple assailants, each moving with impossible speed and perfect coordination. They did not linger nor reveal themselves, and neither did they waste a single motion. It was as if they were toying with him.

They struck and vanished. They lay low, but then a blur could tear through again.

A whisper of displaced air passed behind him. Sagiri pivoted and thrust his blades backward, but once again, he met nothing. In the same instant, a sharp impact drove into his thigh, nearly forcing him to one knee. He suppressed the pain, refusing to yield ground. This could only be the stealth corps of Tagayia. "The Shadow Unit," he murmured.

These were not hunters seeking capture. They were executioners, dispatched only when death was the sole objective. Their ability to suppress their presence made them indistinguishable from the darkness itself, and their movements were so swift that they appeared as nothing more than fleeting blurs at the edge of vision. Sagiri adjusted his stance, abandoning the idea of tracking them visually. His right eye was dormant, along with the archive. Trying to do so was futile. Instead, he focused on the subtle shifts in the environment, the faint compression of air, the nearly imperceptible tremor of disturbed leaves. It was the only warning he would receive.

Another blur.

He reacted instantly, swinging his blades just in time to intercept a descending strike. Sparks erupted as steel met steel, but even in that brief clash, he failed to see his opponent clearly. The figure dissolved back into the darkness before he could counter. It was clear that they were only attacking him and not Lira. He was their only target. If he kept being back to back with the girl, and if she defended him again, then it would be clear that they were in bed together, and that would deny him any chance of her taking him to their base if things went south this time. Sagiri had a feeling that things were about to get worse.

Without thinking too much and while Lira was not anticipating the hit, Sagiri moved his finger, hitting the vital points on her back enough to cripple her, before he landed a palm to her back and sent her flying forward. She crashed onto a tree with a crash before there was silence. Just like Sagiri thought, a blur went past, and Lira was gone. It seemed they had not been going at full strength because Lira was closer to him.

To them, she was his prisoner.

The attacks intensified soon after. Blurs of motion converged from multiple directions, each strike timed to exploit the smallest opening. Sagiri deflected one blow only to feel another graze his back. He spun to retaliate, but the assailant had already disappeared, replaced by a new threat from a different angle. There was no rhythm to exploit, no formation to break.

The Shadow Unit functioned as a seamless collective, their movements synchronized with terrifying precision. Every defense Sagiri mounted was met with an immediate and calculated response. For the first time since the battle began, Sagiri felt the undeniable pressure of being outmatched. A shallow cut appeared along his forearm, followed by another across his ribs. None was immediately fatal, but their cumulative effect was clear. The Shadow Unit was not rushing to finish him. They were systematically dismantling his ability to fight back.

Sagiri exhaled slowly, forcing his mind into absolute focus. He needed to change the tempo of the battle. He needed to

He closed his eyes.

The next attack came instantly, a blur descending toward his neck. Sagiri moved not by sight but by instinct. He swept his blades desperately. He swept both of them upwards in a decisive arc. This time,

the first blade met more than air, but the second blade scraped a blade just barely. Silence returned for a fraction of a second. Then, as if they had just been playing around before, things got even more intense. They closed in. Blurs multiplied at the edges of his perception, converging from every direction. Sagiri tightened his grip on his blades.

Even with him trying to remain in the fight, he knew that with the archive remaining silent, his right eye and Nokai, he did not stand a chance against his opponent. They were the most deadly opponent he had ever faced yet. If something did not give soon. His fate was set in stone.

He was going to die.