

KEEPER 261

Chapter 261. SHOWERS OF DEBRIS

"Everyone, step back first. If you don't want to die!" Sagiri said to Seya and her fighters. "You too," he turned to the two squads.

First things first.

The arrows needed to be put to work. Seya had submitted just like he had hoped. It had taken things to completely go out of hand before it happened, but Sagiri did not, for once, think the woman was going to just give her turf over without things going so stale or close to the point of rotting.

The thousands of them, suspended above him, trembled against the archive. He had spent a chunk of his strength just for this, and he just hoped no more madness could ensue, well, until he at least recovered. Both squads had now left his side, and they had gone into hiding just as Seya and the remainder of her fighters. It seemed like the civilians had been moved far enough during the fight.

Sagiri moved his hands slowly. He brought them up in front of him, palms open, fingers slightly curved, like he was feeling the space and controlling it. He felt every angle of every arrow. He stretched his hands wide before he pulled them in and crossed them on his chest. The pressure changed as the arrows tightened together. It pressed into the ground, into his chest, into the air itself. Breathing felt heavier.

Sagiri rolled his wrists once. Like he was loosening something invisible, then he spread his fingers wider. The arrows responded this time. A faint tremor passed through the suspended shower, as if something had just taken hold of it more firmly before they changed trajectory. Their tips began to turn, slowly at first, then faster, rotating in perfect unison until the entire storm angled upward. Thousands of arrows, aligned to a single direction.

Upwards.

Sagiri stepped forward once. He opened his stance even wider as if he was carrying the weight of the arrows on his back. His hands rose slightly higher, elbows loose, posture relaxed, a harsh contrast to what he was doing. His head tilted just a fraction, eyes tightly shut with maximum concentration, like he was being careful with the weight he was holding.

Then he paused, held them there for a split second. The air tightened even more, like something was about to break. Sagiri gathered all his strength at that moment. Then, in an instant, he stood up straight, pulled his hands apart, and smacked his fists together. The archive surged. Sagiri moved within it, jumping once into the air and taking the thousands of arrows with him.

He pushed the whole shower with him as he rose, and they went higher and higher. With a cry and with everything Sagiri could master, he pushed them once more, and this time they tore through the ground that was the artificial sky of Tatani. There was a momentary pause before they tore the ground and split it.

They did not stop even after the sharp impact made the whole place tremble. Sunlight tore into the place from the forming cracks before the place caved in, and with it also came the thousands of pieces of debris. If Sagiri did not move away, he was for sure going to be smashed. Stone cracked above him, a deep split racing across the surface before chunks broke loose and dropped fast. Dust followed, thick and blinding, turning the air into a choking haze.

Sagiri didn't look up. He moved. Gravity was his friend this time as he allowed it to bring him down even more quickly. He stepped on one falling debris the size of a house to gain momentum. He twisted his body between the two big pieces of debris, big enough to crush him, barely avoiding getting smashed.

No time to relax or even take a breath before the shower got even more life-threatening. Sagiri dodged in a blur and twisted his body to avoid being hit, but just as he was escaping, another rammed into him hard. That was going to hurt for a while. He fell hard, spitting a mouthful of blood as he went. His feet hit the ground hard, and he slid back a few yards.

More were still falling, and he did not have the luxury to catch his breath because he had to dodge yet another one the size of a house. He took one step forward, just as a slab slammed into the ground where he had been. He shifted left immediately, smaller fragments raining down around him, striking the stone with sharp, rapid impacts.

More were still raining down, and he had to stop them.

"Arrgh!!" A groan tore from deep inside Sagiri's chest. He must have underestimated how deep underground Tatani was. The markings on his body stirred. He did not have time to move within the archive or push it out.

Sagiri jumped to meet falling debris. He pushed his hand back, and with all his remaining strength, he rammed a fist into the debris. The piece of debris shattered but its pieces were still big enough to hurt.

"Nokai!!" He finally called as he landed. The archive hummed as Sagiri pushed it out. Just enough to shield his body from the falling debris. Perhaps he should have called for Nokai sooner. The blades sprang out of the archive and got to work slicing the debris into small pebbles so that when they finally touched the archive, they were just pebbles.

The shower of debris went on for a few seconds before it finally stopped. Nokai did not stop as it got to work to dig Sagiri out from under the pebbles.

Sagiri shook off the dirt before he pulled himself from underneath the dirt, stone, and debris. He could finally catch his breath, but he was now spent. He only had the strength to crawl out before he collapsed on top of the heap of debris. Nokai fell into his hand before the blades snapped back seconds later into their handle.

"Sagiri!! Sagiri!!" N'varu's voice tore the place apart after a few seconds of silence befell Tatani. He was frantic, and Sagiri could feel his fear as he ran around searching for him. Dozens of feet followed right behind him, calling him too. Sagiri could tell how hard it was to find him at the moment. He looked brown and black up to his face.

"Where are you!!" N'varu yelled even when he was standing right on top of him.

"You are going to crush my lungs further," Sagiri coughed, and only then did N'varu jump aside.

"He is alive! He is here!" N'varu yelled to the others in relief.

"I just stopped thousands of arrows. Yet you think I can easily be killed by this?" Sagiri choked on his own blood.

"Shut up!" N'varu said, pulling him up from the dirt. "You cause too much trouble."

"You are welcome," Sagiri said right before he passed out from exhaustion.

Chapter 262. TERMS AND REUNIONS

"A month is not enough," Seya said. She might have submitted, but she was still prideful.

It was five hours since Sagiri broke the sky of Tatani and passed out from exhaustion. He stayed passed out for four more hours. While he slept, of course, the shadow corp gave him the healing pill, and just like always, it worked wonders. His inner strength had been spent, so the pill was helpful to help him heal his broken ribs. Seya had provided food for them and a place to wait till he woke up. The chief's house. By the looks of the two squads when he woke up, they did not rest but watched like a hawk.

Sagiri was so hungry when he woke up and did not care if Tatani had poisoned the food they gave him before he was piling plates. He needed to recover his strength as soon as possible.

And now it was finally time to talk terms. Of course, they had to discuss the way forward. Just to make it all more dramatic, a chief attire was left for Sagiri, and the squads didn't tell him what it was until he was well into the council room of Tatani. The coat dragged behind him as he walked, and he only realized he had been pranked when Kiuga could not stop laughing. Sagiri did not plan on being chief, but that was irrelevant for now.

Ninoka and Tinka were also present. They held both fear and hate for Sagiri. Both feelings were what most rulers manifested in their followers, so it was still good.

"In case you haven't noticed, your hiding place is broken, and you have to leave here in a month, maximum," Sagiri said.

"I have to give the people an account and convince them to leave. That will take at least two months of preparation."

"How about you tell them they will die if they don't leave as soon as possible?" Sagiri said.

"You are the chief of Tatani now. You need to understand how ruling a tribe works," Ninoka said.

"Can everyone please stop calling me chief. I did not come to conquer Tatani and change its systems. I only came to give you a way out."

"That is not how it works." Tinka said, "If you subdue a ruler, you take his seat. The Asakana there can tell you that. If someone were to beat the great chief of the north, Chief Zaka would have to give his seat to him. Tatani can not move forward without a leader."

This was more troublesome than Sagiri had thought.

"Does such a person even exist?" Kiuga said. Zaka was a beast. A beast among beasts.

"Fine. Let's assume I am your chief. Shouldn't you listen to your chief?" Sagiri said, and there were snickers from the Sagiri squad.

"What an unchiefly thing to ask?" Kaka said, and Sagiri was even more confused.

"The Southerner has a point. If Safaya and some tribes from whom you took lands realize your current state, they will not hesitate to come for your blood. Leaving quickly is the only way out." Yoka said.

"Then I just put the place under an illusion together with my three aides," Seya said.

"An illusion can not protect you forever," Kiuga said. Kiuga Yoka and sagiri were the only ones sitting with the three of Tatani. The others were spread around the big room. The shadows were being shadows as usual, except for Tavora, who looked like he wanted to argue at every turn but decided against it.

"Even so, we need two months at least to prepare and bury our dead before we can leave," Seya said. Her voice slightly wavered at the last statement.

"In two months, you will most likely all be buried here," Sagiri said. What was difficult for Seya to understand?

"A month and a half," Seya still debated.

"A month exactly. I will be waiting at the southern border exactly four weeks from today. If you are not there, the blood of your people will be on you." Sagiri said with finality.

"Then they can leave, but I can't. My child died on these lands ten years ago. He should be turning sixteen. I have to see him become an adult before I leave," Seya suddenly said, and the room froze. Sagiri had seen the woman in all phases, but he had not seen her seem so small and defeated at the moment. A mother is a mother after all, and Myama even had fought death partly to give her offspring to Sagiri. Sagiri could now understand why Seya was hellbent on stretching the time out.

"The dead are already dead. Do you want everyone to die so that you can dance under the stars to see off your son..." Tavora started to speak. the little brat.

"Fine. Six weeks then. No more," Sagiri cut him off with a glare, and Seya gasped. She must not have expected his change of heart, but even Sagiri could understand the need to hold an adult and final farewell for her child.

Suddenly, Ninoka and Tinka left their seats and took a knee.

"Thank you for your kindness, chief!" they said in chorus.

"I am not your chief...." Sagiri defended but let it go midway. "Seya will keep being chief till further notice," Sagiri said, and Kaka shook his head in disappointment.

"I will be the assistant chief, till then," Seya said, bowing slightly.

"Whatever. Now, where are my girls?" Sagiri asked what he had wanted to ask most. Seya paused for a while before she gave a hand signal to her fighter at the door. The room went silent for a few more minutes as they waited for the girls.

Moments later, the door opened, and everyone turned around swiftly. There was a pause before there were stifled laughs at the tragedy that had befallen the ladies. It was the biggest tragedy of the century.

"Are they under an illusion?" Kiuga asked, stifling another laugh, but he failed this time and burst out laughing.

"No. But Tatani women don't fight, and their duty is only to learn illusion and continue the clan. The men use weapons, and women learn illusion." Seya said. Well, women were the masters of the art anyway, but that was not the problem at the moment. "They could not go around dressed like teenage boys," Seya said.

The four girls standing at the centre of the room looked nothing like when Sagiri had last seen them. They were now adorned in maidenly, flowery gowns. Their hair was loose and pulled, adorned with precious stones. They were decorated with tribal oca, and they looked really lavish. Well, except for the scowls on their faces. Lira was not scowling. She seemed to be the only one who didn't care what she was wearing.

"You ladies look ladish..." Tavora nodded in approval.

"I will kill you if you finish that statement," Gavina said, trembling with rage.

"How were we even able to make them wear that?" Sagiri said, hiding his smile as well.

"illusion. They thought they were wearing battle gear." Seya said, and the whole room went silent before laughter tore the place.

"I should kill you!" Pavire growled.

The threats and threatrics went on for a while before the two squads finally settled the matter and had to leave Tatani two hours later. It was now sundown, and the ladies were still wearing gowns. A dozen Tatani fighters escorted them, too.

The three squads broke from Tatani. They had not been gone that long anyway, but they had to rendezvous with the other fifteen of Yoka's squad.

As they pulled close to the area where they had set up base before going in, however, Sagiri could smell something else in the air. He stopped instantly, and the ones behind him came to a stop.

"Death."

Chapter 263. DEATH IN THE AIR

"Death!" Sagiri said, and everyone stopped. They were at least 10V out from the base.

The three squads had been moving more relaxed this time. Well, except the ladies who looked weird running in the modest gowns. The smell of death, however, was the last thing they expected on their way back from Tatani. Could it be a carcass of an animal?

No way

It wasn't fresh either, because he couldn't smell blood. The smell of death was so thick it must have been at least a day old. It was also no doubt human.

"What do you mean?" Yoka came to a stop beside Sagiri. He was leading the Yoka squad just like Tinka was leading the dozen fighters of Tatani.

"Someone is dead," Sagiri said.

"But that is the direction of the base," Tavora said, and silence stretched for a long moment.

"That is indeed odd." Kiuga said, "Why could there be someone dead near the base?"

"I can perceive anyone in the base, either," Sagiri said, and the night air seemed to freeze at his words. "Are you sure?" Yoka asked.

"Yes," Sagiri said, pushing his senses out once again. He had managed to recover most of his strength in the past few hours, and he was sure his senses were sharp. He had not missed a thing. Not even a heartbeat had reached his ears.

"We move in!" Captain Yoka said, and the three squads moved. They moved even more quickly and with urgency this time. It was clear something odd had happened. The closer they got, the thicker the scent of death filled the air. Everyone was on high alert, but they did not falter. A few fit, and they would be in the base clearing. The smell of death was now undoubtedly coming from the base, and the squads pushed forward even faster. They tore into the clearing at the same time, and seconds later, all movements ceased as the squads came to a sudden stop.

What...

The sight that greeted them was even worse than they could have possibly imagined.

Night made the battlefield harder to understand, but it was clear as day that a very vicious battle had taken place. At first, it looked like uneven ground had emerged, which was not previously there. shadows layered over shadows, shapes that didn't settle into anything clear.

Then the details began to form, but for Sagiri, he could see it clearly from the word go. Clear signs of batter. Shattered tree trunks. The land was torn open. Dark lines cut through the earth, some shallow, others deep enough to swallow the light completely. Broken stone lay scattered across the field, edges catching pale silver where the moon touched them.

And then...

The bodies.

They were so badly mutilated that it was hard to find them at first glance. They blended into the darkness, but Sagiri could see them.

Fifteen.

All fifteen members of the shadow squad that they had left behind lay in fatal positions all over the clearing. They were positioned where the fight had ended for them. One near a split in the ground, half

in shadow. Further out, lying across broken stone, outline sharp against the pale dust. A few closer together. Sagiri could see even signs of the shadow whirlpool, but it seemed to have been forcefully broken. There was no enemy body in the clearing. There were only limbs scattered and some full corpses of the fifteen shadow corps members.

The silence of the moment pressed harder here than anywhere else. The wind passed once, light and uncertain, shifting dust across the ground. It traced over the shapes, softening edges for a moment before revealing them again. They seemed to have been attacked at most a few hours after they had split.

"What is happening?" Tavora said with wide eyes. "Did you, Tatani, do this?" he accused. Typical Tavora just careless with his words.

"You have fought with us, yet you think we can kill the shadow corp members of Tagayia. "That is not our killing style. " This just looks sadistic," Tina said, and everyone had to admit to that.

Sagiri had seen only one person kill with such malice. The boy who killed the gravescale. Sagiri had never seen him then, but he knew Salka had taken care of it. Even more, the battle did not look like it was done one to fifteen. The battlefield was wide as if a squad had attacked.

"This was not Tatani. This killing style is one I have never seen." Yoka said in a cold voice before he jumped from the branch he was perched on and landed in the scene. Sagiri raised his hand to stop his squad from moving.

"Let them have a moment," Sagiri said. He could not imagine walking into his own squad butchered. And it is the most inhumane way possible. It was only right to let them look at their comrades and have a few moments.

"Who do you think could have done this?" Zazarie asked.

"Do you think someone was trying to sabotage your mission?" Kiuga said.

"Not many knew I was on this mission. This is a bit strange. Could the mandra and the general of the shadows double-cross them?" Sagiri said, furrowing his eyebrows. Nothing was making sense.

"I don't think so. They have the most to lose if you don't win, and from what I hear, the general of the shadows is the most benevolent man of Tagayia. impossible!" Kiuga refutes that immediately.

"Perhaps the councils that wanted you dead," Banga said, and Sagiri was already thinking in that direction.

"My aunt won't do that. Tatani is sitting on her land. She might hate you, but she wants Tatani gone more than anyone." Gavina refuted that immediately.

"Then the war council?" N'varu asked.

"Felunka is emotional and hates me, but he is not bold enough to defy the mandra. Besides, the mandra already put him through a wall for inciting war," Sagiri remembered.

"But who is powerful enough to kill a squad of the shadow corps, and in the most gruesome way?" Kiuga wondered out loud.

"We northerners kill with honour. At least I know it's not the Asakana, perhaps the Chimera." Kaka said with confidence.

"Don't speak nonsense," Maita snarled.

"Could it be your benefactor?" Kiuga asked.

"I highly doubt he has anything to do with this. He fights best in the shadows. Killing in the light like this is not his style."

The back and forth went on with a game of guess, which went on for a while, and in all this, N'varu was the most silent.

"So to say the least, we don't know who our enemy is?" Kiuga shook his head.

"Not exactly." N'varu finally spoke, and everyone wheeled to look at him. Even those of the shadow squad.

Chapter 264. ASSASSINS

"Not exactly." N'varu finally spoke, and everyone wheeled to look at him. Even those of the shadow squad.

"What do you mean?" Yoka turned around swiftly.

"Have you seen this style of killing before?" Kiuga tilted his head too.

"If you step back, you can read the message. The bodies are not lying around carelessly or wherever the fight ended for them. The severed limbs are used to join a code. They are sending a message." N'varu said.

"Who is sending the message?" Yoka asked. Now that N'varu had said that, the pattern was beginning to get clear. It was now obvious that the bodies were laid in the clearing to make a certain shape. N'varu held his breath as everyone moved away from the clearing. It looked like he was reluctant to say what he wanted to, but had to. He kept looking at sagiri and looking away as if he expected sagiri to read whatever was drawn by the corpses.

"Who. Tell me who?" Yoka asked again.

"The deadliest assassin group of the south. The veil blades," Sagiri said, and everyone froze.

What on earth?

"The south?" Kiuga asked, looking at the bodies, but could not read the inscription. "So you are from the south, too?"

"I thought you were the smartest. These two are attached at the hip. Where else could he be from?" Kaka shook his head in disappointment.

"I had my speculations, but N'varu seems perfectly normal, and Sagiri well... he is the definition of weird." Kiuga defended.

"Just how many southerners are in the north?" Tavora seethed. To that, neither Sagiri nor N'varu answered.

"All I can say is you all need to go back to college, you go back to Tatani, and you need to go back to Alike. This no longer concerns you." N'varu said in the most grave voice sagiri had heard from him.

"Fifteen of my men have been killed. I fear this deeply concerns me, Southerner." Yoka almost snarled.

"Then you and all your men will surely die if you don't move now." N'varu was not bulging. His eyes had not left the scene once, and with every second, he seemed to be more worried.

"Do you know what it is saying?" Sagiri asked, and N'varu turned to him.

"One word. Tiralka," N'varu said in southern dialect. Only Sagiri could understand that. Now that sagiri had understood the word, the archive could finally read the inscription on the ground.

"What does it mean? My men have just been killed to send a message to someone who can read the inscription. I assume that it's the two of you." Captain Yoka said in an accusatory tone.

"It means death," Sagiri said. "The small blade at the end of the word means it's a declaration of death."

"The veil blades of the south are assassins feared even by the south. No one knows who they are, but whenever they set out to kill someone, they for sure kill that person. If you insist on making this your business, you will surely die, Captain Yoka." N'varu insisted.

"My men are dead. You wish for me to turn a blind eye?" Yoka trembled with rage.

"Yes, that is the wisest thing to do if you wish to protect the rest," N'varu added flames to the fire.

"The veil blades? How come I have never heard of them?" Kiuga wondered.

"If you know their name, you die. So everyone here has to die." N'varu said, "It's either them or you. If you insist on meddling." Nvaru warned again.

The message was sent to me, right?" Sagiri asked. "Then the south must know of my existence and does not want me there." Sagiri was a little saddened that the south could send assassins after him.

"Not true. The veil blades, though a huge shadow organization, do not speak for the south. They are barbaric and kill anyone they think will disturb the future peace of the South. They do not speak for the entire council of the south." N'varu said.

"How many do you think they are?" Kiuga asked.

"A veil blade squad of assassins consists of only six, but mostly they work in pairs or just alone," N'varu answered, and Kiuga's jaw dropped dramatically.

"You mean to tell me only a handful of them did this?" Ulekai swallowed.

"Most likely. They train to kill since they step out of the womb. They only know how to kill and nothing more. Only I can stall them so you can take your men back to Alikia City, and you back to college. The mission Sagiri called you for is at its end." N'varu insisted.

"So you want us to run with our tails between our legs?" Kaka snapped. "We Asakana's don't run from strong opponents."

"Yes, at least you will then live to fight another day. It is not wise to fight when you know you have no chance of winning. You are not strong enough to fight the veil blades. " Maybe in three years or four, if you train very, very hard." Nvaru was dead serious, and his tone kept growing grave with every question. There was also urgency in it.

"Do you think you can beat them? Not to be a deal breaker, but they just wiped out fifteen shadows." Maita said.

"They fight the southern way. Even if all of you were to fight them, you won't stand a chance," N'varu said.

"And you can fight this southern way?" Rana of the shadows asked.

"Yes. None of you has seen me fight the southern way. And for the veil blades assassins, I have to fight with the death style only taught to them. Perhaps with it, we can buy time," N'varu said.

"And where did you learn how to fight using the southern style?" Kiuga wondered again.

"I grew up in the south till I was twelve. I only came north to find Sagiri. To do that, I had to be the best of the best," N'varu said.

"Tinka, you take your fighters back. They must not know we are now in bed together. Send me a message if anything changes." Sagiri turned to Tinka. Tinka did not look like he wanted to get involved anyway, and he just bowed to Sagiri before him, and the dozen fighters were pulling out. A moment of silence prevailed before Sagiri spoke again.

"What do you want to do, Captain?" Sagiri asked. He could tell Captain Yoka was thinking hard about whatever N'varu was saying.

"I send my dead men to the shadow base in Ranga then I fight these assassins...."

Pop!

Pop!

Just as Yoka was speaking, suddenly there were popping sounds coming from the corpses. Everyone turned around immediately, just in time to see the bodies dissolve inward and just disappear.

it began as a faint distortion along the edges of the bodies, their outlines softening then, without sound, they started to come apart not collapsing, not decaying, but breaking into fine, weightless particles that lifted from their forms in slow, steady streams, hands losing shape first, then limbs, then the rest, every trace of flesh and bone dissolving the same way until even the skeleton failed to remain, rising into the air like dust pulled by an unseen force, thinning, scattering, and vanishing completely, leaving nothing behind but empty ground where they had once been. just their clothes.

Yoka stumbled before he fell on his knees, and a scream tore through his chest. It was truly a pained howl.

His men were gone now, and he did not even have bodies to bury.

Chapter 265. FIND THEM

"I am going to kill them all!!" Yoka swore as he wailed. The entire remaining members of the Yoka squad reeked of sorrow. Tavora had shed a few tears too, and Kaka did not call him unmanly for what it's worth. It is the greatest taboo after all to deny a man the respect of having a corpse to bury.

How ruthless of the veil blades.

"The veil blades do not leave evidence of their hand," N'varu added. He must have forgotten that fact.

After the Yoka squads collected the clothes of their comrades, the two squads gathered again. They needed to move out more quickly now, more than ever.

"What is our next plan. " You call Captain Yoka," Kiuga said. The situation was too heavy for him to handle. Yoka's men had been slaughtered to just send a message and to show that they had been reduced to ash. They could be in danger, but since the two squads were now tied together by fate, they needed to let Captain Yoka decide.

"We need to find them, I have to kill them even if I die trying," Yoka said

"You don't find the veil blades. they find you," N'varu said.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Tavora asked.

"We have what they want. They want Sagiri dead. So as long as we are with him, they will find us. They will not stop until he is dead." N'varu said.

"Then I can just kill them," Sagiri said.

"Don't underestimate the veil blade. I have a feeling not one squad of them is in the north. They are persistent and just as deadly. The mission comes before their lives. Do you understand fighting someone who is absolutely ready to die for the mission?" N'varu said.

"We northerners are not scared of death either," Kaka said.

"You are not scared of death, but the word death doesn't exist in their existence, only the mission. They are cold-blooded and ruthless." N'varu insisted.

"Even so, we need to come up with a plan," Kiuga said.

"Kiuga, talk with me for a moment." Captain Yoka said, pulling Kiuga aside. The two talked for a long while in low tones. Of course, Sagiri could hear what they were talking about, but he acted as if he didn't. Whatever the captain wished, that is what they could do. He was partly the reason his men had died. Not partly but fully. Perhaps Felunka was right. Wherever he went, dead bodies piled.

After a long moment, the two came back, and Kiuga's expression was grave.

"This is the plan. The captain thinks I am the best fit to come up with a plan since Tavora is still grieving and in no place to come up with a good plan," Kiuga said. Tavora trembled and wiped a tear away. The boy was indeed emotional. Even so, he did not say anything this time.

"We will go back the way we came. Sagiri is still wanted by the kun of the west, and we have stayed in her lands long enough. We go through the central plains before we head for Alike City. We have to make sure the general of the shadows knows what has happened eventually.

"To make it possible, we split into three groups. Tavora, you will lead the first group which will lead. Your mission is to make way for us and still go unnoticed. Your mission is to get the message of everything that has happened to the shadow general. This mission, as you know, is for his ears only. No one can know Sagiri's whereabouts since it could cause chaos between the councils.

"They know that much. The Shadow Corp is only loyal and answers to the general directly. He handpicked this squad himself," Yoka said.

"Well then, that is good. We can't have those factions ruining this plan," Kiuga said.

"The fourteen of you will run at full speed once we reach the sectoral plains.

"Sagiri will be on the second squad with N'varu and Captain Yoka. The three will be the most targeted group. Once they make contact, Captain Yoka will fire a flare, and the third group will join in. This one I will be leading personally. It involves all the members of the squad, Sagiri, and the War College warlings.

"Remember this is a secret mission, and we will avoid firing flares at all costs. This might attract more attention, and if it is Sagiri's enemy, then even worse. The central squad will involve three of our best fighters. I assume they can hold their own and fire the flare in a matter of life and death.

"But isn't the central squad supposed to have many fighters?" Tavora asked.

"You have seen Sagiri fight. Do you think he needs more fighters with him? Even more, you have heard what N'varu has said. Sagiri is the target. They will no doubt hit the centre the hardest, so it's best if our best fighter, our captain, and a fighter who knows their fighting styles are in the centre. More of you being there will just cause them a hindrance," Kiuga said.

"Tavora, your job is to get as much backup as you can to make the general understand." Captain Yoka said. "I trust you can protect the squad in my absence.

"Yes, captain." Tavora tried to act strong, but it was clear he was scared.

"You will also tell the general that Tatani is under my protection now. He and the mandra are to stay out of Tatani for the next two months until they move south. Tell the shadow general we will meet again soon. He decides whether it will be as enemies or equals." Sagiri said. He knew the General could understand. He had done his part, so it was up to the general to do his part now.

"Now we move out!" Kiuga said, and the new squads fell into groups.

Tavora was reluctant to leave Captain Yoka behind, but Yoka forced him to get his head straight. This was a life-or-death situation after all. After an undignified farewell from Tavora, he finally manned up and spearheaded his squad. The survival of the other teams, after all, depended on how fast they could get aid.

Yoka, N'varu, and Sagiri were next to break off.

Sagiri turned to look at Kiuga, and in that moment, mutual understanding passed between them.

At least this way, no one could be caught in the crossfire. Kiuga bowed slightly but held his head high. He always knew and prioritized the good of the squads. Sagiri trusted him fully to put a leash on the squad.

Chapter 266 DECOY

"Are you sure it was a good idea to lie to the boy?" Sagiri asked Yoka after they had been moving for a while. The three were hiding their presence as Yoka wanted.

Sagiri knew what Yoka had decided. He had heard him talk with Kiuga. It was a smart plan, but it was also suicidal on his part.

"I have to equal the scales for my men to find peace. " As the captain, I owe them that much at least," Yoka said.

"By choosing suicide?" N'varu asked. "We two could equal the scales for you."

"A man doesn't depend on others to do everything for him. Besides, I want my remaining men to live and report to the general. You also want your friends out of this. You should be thanking me." Yoka said.

Sagiri just sighed. There was no convincing the man, and this was a good plan indeed. It could put both squads out of harm's way. Yoka had created a good decoy for the third squad to follow. The three were heading to the Central Plains, but they were pulling into the Yalami Forest, south of Yalami Forest Academy. The forest went further south, and it could be good for them to take the fight.

Hiding their presence was the first step to the plan. Yoka had put their scented clothes in the luggage with the dead's things. With it, Gavina's beast and Pavire's bird could follow them for a while.

"You know both squads won't be fooled for long," N'varu asked.

"It will still buy us time and put them out of harm's way. At the speed at which the shadow corps moves, it will be hard for your team to catch up for a while. Even so, Tavora is too smart, and after his sadness passes, he will know." Yoka said.

"He'd better be sad till morning then. By then, it will take them a while to catch up." Sagiri said.

The three tore through the Anki lands. Instead of going into the central plains, they would proceed southeast into the Yalami forest. Further southeast, and they would make contact at the Burren Lands. Sagiri had never seen N'varu move that fast. It was as if he had been hiding his true strength all the while. He was truly a character. He moved through the trees, jumping from one tree to another, keeping up with Sagiri and Yoka. Sagiri had now recovered most of his strength, and the sleep at Tatani had helped him so much.

"Warning. If the shadows of Tatani are good in the shadows. The veils of the south. Not just the veil blades blend into any environment. Fight them in the forest, they look like leaves, fight them in the desert, they look like sand. fight them in the water, they look like water. Perhaps the shadow corps was wiped out because they did not see them coming and did not know who they were up against." N'varu said.

There was silence as the groups kept moving.

"That said, I have never fought one head-on. I hear they use needle darts. They use their tongues as the lever. That said, any part of their body is a weapon. It has been a while since I fought the southern way." N'varu cracked his knuckles.

It was now almost dawn, and the sun could be out in an hour or two. It would take at least until midnight to hit the Yalami forest at this speed. They stopped at a small town at dawn to eat. They needed to rest, too, but that was not an option. Tavora could soon realise he had been lied to. He is impulsive to say the least. The squad under Kiuga was not stupid either, and they would soon realize the central squad did not exist, and they had just been chasing a decoy.

After a few more minutes of rest, the three broke away again, and this time they headed southeast. The goal was to hit Yalami Forest at midnight. Yoka was leading this time. He was the most eager to make contact with the veil blades. The three did not have a weak member, and Sagiri had to slow down so he did not lose the two after a while.

It was just before sunset when the three hit the Yalami forest.

"Where are the damned assassins?" Sagiri groaned.

"They will be here soon. Just like any assassin, they love the blanket of night." N'varu said. Yalami is the biggest forest of Tatani. It spreads into the central plains, and so deep it almost touches the east.

"Sagiri had been keeping the archive activity to a minimum during the day, but now he had to push it out together with his senses. If these veil blades were as deadly as N'varu said, then he would not leave any room or loophole. He needed to listen to every sound. Perceive every presence and feel any shift in the environment. The group did not change their pace of movement anyway, and they kept moving as fast as they could. Their goal was to take the fight as deep into the woods as possible.

It was silent apart from the beasts of the forest calling to each other. Just the hunting and mating calls sounded for a while. The deeper they went, the more beasts they made contact with.

It was not until after midnight that Sagiri felt a slight shift. This time, he did not stop.

"I think I have felt something, but I lost it," Sagiri said in a low tone, only for the ears of N'varu and Yoka.

"They are here," N'varu said.

Sagiri could feel Yoka's anger immediately and N'varu's excitement mixed with tension.

The three did not stop. The mission had not changed. To take the battle further southeast. They moved even more quickly now. It was clear that the veil blades loved to hide their hands and did not rush to kill. They had made contact, and now they would follow them for a while.

"I can't tell if they are a hundred or two. I feel them everywhere, and they are gone just as quickly." Sagiri said. He had pushed his senses out, keeping them as sharp as ever, but it seemed like his opponents knew what he was capable of. They were somehow making their presence hard to pinpoint. He could not follow one or fully know their position. Sometimes it felt like there were a dozen, then there was just one the next second, then he was gone.

"Those vermin." N'varu cursed. So these were the veil blades.

Amazing and annoying indeed. Sagiri thought.

"Anytime now," Nvaru added after a while.

Chapter 267. CONTACT

"Anytime now."

It had been almost half an hour since N'varu said those words, but nothing had happened yet. Apart from the usual altered and disappearing presence.

At this point, they were deep in the Yalami forest and far south of the Yalami forest academy and even further away from any civilization. This was good.

Deep in the woods, it was dark, but neither of the three needed light to move. Sagiri could see and use his senses. N'varu's eyes had turned white the moment they made first contact. His movements had become more calculated and light. Yoka was a captain of the Shadow Corp, and it was easy to say he was made for darkness.

Suddenly, however, it was as if the darkness seemed to get heavier. Even the cracks of light from the moon suddenly disappeared. A misty darkness started covering the place. The misty darkness made it hard to perceive any presence, and if the presence was altered before now. His right eye, even so, was not affected, but the scents and hearing, and ability to perceive were being affected slightly.

"Petty tricks!" Sagiri groaned.

The three stopped and moved close together. Their backs were closely parked together. They needed to watch each other's backs now more than ever.

"Silence," N'varu said.

Suddenly, however, like the wind from different directions, millions of small needles started flying in.

"Incoming!" Yoka announced. All three had seen the needles, and they started moving. It was as if the needles were raining from all directions at the same time. Sagiri could not see who was throwing them. They really were good at camouflage.

"Boring," Sagiri said. The archive moved out, surrounding all three. The shower did not even touch the archive before Sagiri raised his right hand and stopped the shower. What was with everyone wanting to shower him?

First with arrows and now with needles. He did not hold the needles this time. He swiped his hand. The needles changed trajectory and flew back in the direction they had come from.

There was no sound of them hitting someone, however. Just the small taps of them hitting the tree trunks.

Silence prevailed once more, and just like that, their presence was gone once again.

"They are gone," Sagiri said.

"How long are they going to play these games?" Yoka sighed.

"The first rule of an assassin is to break the mind of their opponent. especially if they might be stronger. A strong opponent with a weak mind or a broken mind might even be killed by a child." N'varu said.

He was right. These assassins were taking their time. They were not rushing. Perhaps the first attack was meant to test his defence. They were trying to see their opponents' strength.

"How to fight an evasive, careful, patient, and lethal opponent," Sagiri said. The three were now circling in the misty darkness that had not faded. In fact, it had grown so much that it looked like they were standing in an abyss of darkness.

"Beat them at their own game," Yoka said.

"Very well, Captain. I almost thought you could jump in carelessly to avenge your men carelessly," N'varu said.

"Silence," Sagiri said. They were so good at camouflage that his right eye could not quite catch them. He just saw the mist change shape now and then, as if it carried something, then it calmed.

The mist thinned the world, turned distance unreliable, and bent outlines until nothing held a clean shape. Sagiri stepped into it, and the space around him felt occupied, but nothing was clearly seen.

Something shifted ahead.

Not a body. Just a distortion like heat over stone, then it settled into the suggestion of a figure. Before it could be fixed in place, it wasn't there anymore.

Another presence brushed past his right. Close. Too close for his liking.

"They are in the mist. And close," Sagiri said in a whisper.

There was no sound of approach. Only the sudden awareness that something had crossed through his space and continued without pause. The mist barely reacted, folding and settling again.

The ground began to lose certainty. What had been open space moments ago felt narrower now. Angles shifted. Lines changed. A step in any direction felt... occupied.

Just how many were they?

Sagiri had a feeling there were not many, but they were using the mist to make their presence seem heavy. A shape formed beside Yoka. Half there, half swallowed by the haze. It didn't advance. It didn't attack. It simply stilled long enough for Sagiri to feel its presence around them before dissolving back into the mist.

Another appeared further out. Or the same one. There was no way to tell. They didn't move in ways that could be followed. They didn't commit to being seen long enough to count, to track, to understand. Each presence was brief, controlled, and placed exactly where it needed to be to increase confusion on sight before vanishing again.

A figure crossed directly in front of Sagiri. For a fraction of a second, it was clear. Shoulders squared, fist low, a faint metallic edge running along the forearm. Then just as fast, it broke apart.

Now the space beside him felt closed. The mist stayed still. But within it, everything kept shifting. Every appearance and absence hid where it had come from and where it had gone. The battlefield rearranged constantly, until nothing remained neutral. It was as if they were carrying out some strange whirlpool, like the shadow corp. It also felt like hypnosis, as if the more Sagiri saw, the more he was missing them.

His eyes would be the death of him.

"I am going to wear the seals. Touch my shoulder if you want to pass a message," Sagiri said. His hands reached into his pockets, and he snapped the seal to his ears. Just like always, it felt like he had been submerged in deep waters.

It was peaceful just as he remembered it.

Next, he closed both his eyes. Now that he couldn't see or hear, it felt like he was submerged in a deep sea.

The forest felt like a big ocean, and he was standing at the bottom. He could feel the ripples now even clearer. The waves and everything that moved within the waters.

"Found you!"

A cruel simile drew itself on Sagiri's lips. His lips curled back over his teeth in triumph as the waters began to ripple. Nothing could hide from him in the deep waters. The ripples did not lie. Mist is, after all, also part of water.

"There are twelve!" Sagiri said.

Chapter 268. BREAKING THE MIST

Knowing their positions was the easiest part. Sagiri pushed the archive out around N'varu and Yoka to shield them from the needle darts raining down on them.

Even after Sagiri found them and their positions, they did not stop in their relentless mist attacks. They were completely on the offensive and not giving Sagiri and his team any chance to go on the offensive.

He had stopped the darts. Thousands of them by now, but they kept coming. It was as if they were not going to change their fighting style until one of the dart needles broke through the archive shield.

It was futile anyway. The archive did not have a blind spot. He could just keep blocking them all night. The only problem was that at some point, he would run out of energy, and he was sure that was what the assassins were betting on. A time when the archive would fail.

"N'varu tapped Sagiri on the shoulder. Sagiri knew what he was trying to say. He could not keep protecting and exhaust himself. Since he could now feel their presence, they could fight and block needles without his protection.

"Are you sure?" Sagiri asked, and N'varu tapped him once.

"Alright. Let's push them back. It's four to one, are you sure you can keep up with four?" Sagiri asked.

There was a moment of silence before he tapped his shoulder. There was slight excitement emanating from him. He was itching to fight the Southern way. The tap was heavier than the first, and Sagiri breathed before he returned hundreds of needles into the mist again. It was surprising that the needles did not hit anyone. First things first. break the mist formation.

Sagiri let the next volley pass, feeling the strain ripple through the Archive as it held just enough to keep Yoka and N'varu safe, then he stepped out of it without warning.

"I will break the mist first. You are on your own now!" Sagiri said. He knew they could hear him.

"Nokai!!"

The pressure dropped behind him as he moved forward into the mist, one hand lifting to catch Nokai. Nokai answered, cutting through the haze to meet his grip as if it had always been there. The blade had been itching for real action, and it was finally time.

Sagiri tore through the deep seas in his mind. The mist felt like dark waters, and just the moment Nokai touched it, he could feel it move back. He didn't rush. He flowed as if he were in deep waters. Each step was placed with quiet precision, before he sank into a stance only he understood. His body turned, folded, and unwound in smooth arcs that carried him between the unseen lines of incoming darts.

He dipped at the waist, a needle slipping past his shoulder, then rose into a pivot, the blade tracing a low curve that parted the mist just enough to reveal a shifting silhouette before it vanished again. The needles felt like the small fish of the sea swimming towards him from all directions. Nokai cut through them in rapid succession. He had to make sure none of the darts touched him. If they contained poison, then they would be troublesome.

Sagiri took another light step as if he was obeying the waves and allowed them to sweep him, but not so much that he forgot he was fighting a deadly opponent. His weight is shifted like sand under the wind. The darts kept coming, but he moved through them, his form weaving in controlled, fluid motions almost like a dance born from the desert itself. patient, inevitable, unbroken by their attacks.

Nokai followed the rhythm, cutting not just as the darts but at the space between them, slicing through currents in the mist and disrupting whatever anchored it. Each turn of his body carried the blade through another unseen line, each step pulling him deeper into the haze, where the air began to resist, to twist, to fight back.

Sagiri didn't stop. He leaned into it. His movements sharpened and flowed like a dance. The dance tightened, accelerating, until the mist around him began to fracture in thin, wavering lines like something unseen was being cut apart from within. To N'varu and Yoka, though he had asked them to watch their own backs, or a few. None of the needles had been able to reach them at how fast Sagiri was circling the place, blocking the darts and cutting through the mist.

"Your friend is full of surprises, isn't he?" Yoka marveled.

"He is the keeper. It would be surprising if he did not live up to his name," N'varu said with pride.

At that moment, Sagiri had turned the mist into a part of his dance. It was no longer obeying its weavers.

The dance accelerated.

The rhythm broke its own limits. His steps shortened, then vanished into motion so tight and fast it no longer read as steps at all. It was a series, only a continuous glide, a blur of turns and pivots that stitched the space around him into a single, unbroken line. Nokai followed that line, faster with each pass, carving arcs that overlapped and crossed until the air itself began to shudder under the pressure.

The mist tried to hold, thickening, folding in on itself, but it couldn't keep its shape. Every layer he cut collapsed into the next, every pocket of concealment stripped the moment it formed. The hiss of darts faded, swallowed by the force of his movement as he drove deeper, the dance tightening into something relentless, something that refused resistance.

Then it gave.

The mist split along the paths he had carved, tearing open in jagged streams that unraveled outward from him, until with one final sharp turn, he cut through the last of it and stepped clear, the haze collapsing behind him. The dance came to an end violently, and Sagiri wheeled Nokai around with so much force before he stuck one side of the blade to the ground.

They had, after all, left a small blade embedded in the ground at the end of their massacre. He was accepting their challenge. Only one of them could leave the place alive.

Sagiri pulled his seals off, and the archive snatched them into the archive pocket. He finally opened his eyes and looked up, his right eye fixated on the now visible opponents who were perched in the trees.

"Now what do you say the real fight begins!" Sagiri snarled.

There was silence as Captain Yoka and N'varu came to flank him.

"It will be an honour to kill you, last child of N'folu. You are a worthy opponent. Not many have been able to break the mist formation," a voice layered with calmness and madness said from behind the leaves.

"I could barely consider you worthy opponents!" Sagiri curled his lips back in disgust.

Chapter 269. N'VARU AND YOKA

"Perhaps we should eliminate those two. They don't belong in this fight.

"You veil blades always think you can kill everyone. I am a sand shade, we don't die by mere blades," N'varu said, and there was silence.

"A sandshade? This just became more interesting. But a sandshade is barely a worthy opponent," the same layered voice said.

"Yet you veil blades have never been able to kill a sand shade before." N'varu mocked. His voice was unlike what Sagiri had ever heard. He was now a different person.

"Well, you will be the second. right after Yonaka," the same answered, and N'varu froze for a moment.

His eyes turned white, and the next moment, he was gone.

"Yonaka could never die from such vermin!" N'varu said as he made contact with someone. A moment later, he tumbled from behind the leaves with a veil blade. The two were going at each other's throats. No one joined the fight for a while as they watched the fight.

N'varu met the Veil Blades without stepping back, and what followed didn't look like a fight Sagiri recognized. It seemed the southern way of fighting was mostly meant to kill. N'varu shifted off-line at the last instant, his body angling in a way that made the incoming strike slide past him by a breath, and he answered in the same movement, his counter already forming before the first had fully missed.

The assassin didn't retreat. He turned into it, wrist rotating, blade gliding along a new path that cut across N'varu's line, forcing another adjustment. Their feet never planted for long. They traced tight, shifting patterns on the ground, half-steps, pivots, sudden slips of weight that broke alignment just as quickly as they formed.

Each attack was short, direct, and immediately answered, deflected into something else, their bodies weaving past each other in close quarters where there was no room for error. The Veil Blade pressed forward with relentless efficiency, his strikes layered and continuous, but N'varu met him in that same language, bending the exchanges instead of stopping them, turning angles into openings and closing them again in the same breath.

"They were using their attacks as defences?" Yoka gasped.

So that was what it was.

To Sagiri, it didn't look like two fighters trading blows. It looked like a single, shifting pattern, both of them moving through it at a speed and precision that made every moment feel one step away from ending the other.

"I might just say you and Yonaka fight the same way. But you are nothing compared to him. It will not take a whole squad of us to wound you," the shadow veil said.

N'varu did not look like he was struggling. Sagiri did not know who Yonaka was, but it seemed he was someone close to N'varu.

"He taught me to fight. Of course, I fight like him, and he won't die to scum like you." N'varu snarled.

"He will die eventually. The poison we put in him has no cure," the veil blade taunted. His head was cleanly shaven, just like the other eleven who were now moving from behind the leaves and treeline. Their clothing stuck to their bodies.

They moved, their blades hanging low along their forearms and at the back of their fists. Their boots were laced with blades too, and after hearing what they just said to N'varu, Sagiri could guess their blades were laced with poison. It would be wise to avoid being cut by any of their blades.

N'varu roared with rage and attacked the veil blade. He sent him flying back a few yards with the palm to his chest.

"Your sand palm is not as strong as his," the veil blade taunted, but he spat a mouthful of blood. Sagiri could not help but think the veil blade was egging N'varu on to anger him so he could lose his cool. He was deadly now, fighting in the southern style, but if he kept going as hard, he could burn out quickly.

"N'varu, calm down!!" Sagiri said before he himself whipped Nokai out of the ground. Time to teach the veil blades some manners. This was the first time tables had turned, and he had had to calm N'varu, and he could only imagine that Yonaka was important to N'varu.

"You bastards better come at me too!!" Yoka roared, losing his spot beside sagiri.

Yoka entered the clash without announcement, slipping between. His movement was sharp and controlled in the way only the Shadow Corps trained. vanish, reappear, strike before presence fully formed. One Veil Blade turned to meet him and found him already past his guard, his blade cutting a tight, precise line that forced him to break stance, but he didn't follow through.

He was gone before the counter could land, shifting behind the second as he stepped in. Their response was immediate. Two angles closing on him at once, fists flashing in short, lethal arcs, but Captain Yoka dissolved through it. His body folded low, then snapped upright in a pivot that carried him out of alignment and into another strike.

"The shadow corps seems to have one who can actually fight. The others were just too easy to kill," one of the veil blades engaged with Yoka said.

This was the first time Sagiri had seen him fighting at full strength, and his agility was outwardly.

Unlike N'varu, Yoka did not lose his cool. He was a captain after all, and he had mastered the art of keeping his feelings in check.

He didn't hold ground. Every movement of his was a disappearance and return, forcing them to chase a position that never stayed. Still, they pressed him harder than expected, their attacks overlapping, tightening the space, forcing his transitions to become sharper, faster, more exact.

Metal met in quick, clipped bursts of contact. Each exchange lasted less than a second before shifting again. The three were moving so fast that their figures were moving in a tight, violent rhythm where a single mistake would end it, and even in motion, even with his speed, it was clear Yoka wasn't overwhelming them.

Their styles of fighting were completely different. The South used offence as defence, but the North separated the two.

Even so, he was holding his own.

It was time for Sagiri to join in the fun.

Chapter 270 STALEMATE

"Now then, don't keep me waiting. Show me what you got." Sagiri said in a slightly bored tone. He mostly wanted to fight them since he had never fought a southerner before. He wanted to engage them as long as possible. Let the archive learn their moves.

Sagiri stepped into their range, yet none of them rushed him. He drew Nokai and held it low. They took their time to surround him before the first attack came in without warning. A short, direct entry meant to test distance, and Sagiri met it with a slight turn of his body, Nokai rising just enough to catch and slide the strike away rather than stop it.

Before the contact even finished, a second was already there, cutting in from the side. He shifted again, a small pivot, the blade tracing a narrow arc that redirected the attack past him while his footwork carried him out of the line of a third that followed from behind. They attacked in waves. They overlapped, each entry timed to exist within the space of the last, forcing Sagiri into constant adjustment.

Sagiri didn't push back. He flowed between them, each movement precise. They were both measuring each other out, and it would be a tragedy if he fell for it. Nokai never struck wide, only intercepting, guiding, and defending the incoming attacks. A Veil Blade slipped inside his reach, his fist driving toward Sagiri's center. Sagiri turned into it, shoulder shifting, Nokai cutting a tight line that forced the man off.

Another replaced him immediately. Then another. The pressure never spiked. It remained constant, suffocating in its consistency, every second filled with motion. They weren't trying to overwhelm him. They were measuring him. Testing reactions, forcing him to reveal more with each exchange. They were becoming faster and more violent with each attack.

Nokai moved faster now, not in power but in precision, each contact sharper, cleaner. He was used to being cornered after his fight with the seventh wing. It made the fight more interesting. Sagiri blocked an attack from one of the nine. He crossed his hands reinforced with blades used for both attacking and defending above his head to fend off the contact. Nokai bounced off.

Well, if Sagiri had inserted much more power, the blades could have broken. The defence even so pushed the man sliding back on his knee. Two stepped on his shoulder and propelled themselves to meet Sagiri.

Sagiri released Nokai from his hands to meet them while he himself dodged another attack from the other two. Fighting them on the ground and in the clearing was getting lethal. They were fast, and the fight looked like a blur. No one had incurred a lethal blow yet. No one had put all his cards on display.

Sagiri broke the line, and the forest took the fight, trunks rising around them as cover and obstacle to both. The nine Veil Blades followed him quickly, flowing with him from tree to tree, never letting him create distance between them.

How persistent.

Sagiri drove off a root, hit a trunk sideways, and pushed again. Nokai was already in his hand now, after her defence. It snapped up to catch a strike that came mid-air. The impact split bark behind him as he rode it into a turn and dropped, only to kick back up as two more closed from opposite sides, one cutting high while the other drove low, their timing so lethal it forced his body to fold between them, spine bending, shoulders rolling, blade deflecting one line while his step erased the other, and before his feet fully touched, a third was already there, stepping off the first assassin's shoulder to gain height, descending with a tight, downward cut that Sagiri met with a sharp pivot.

There was no time to catch its breath. The fight had been going on for a while now, and Sagiri almost felt reborn at how far he was being pushed. They were truly good fighters indeed.

It was a pity they stood on different sides.

Nokai flashed upward, redirecting the strike into the trunk beside him. Wood cracked as the blade bit through bark. Sagiri moved before it struck, slipping along the tree's curve, using it to break sight. He then launched out as another pair came in. One rebounded off a trunk to his left, the other sliding low along the ground, their attacks layering in threes again.

High, mid, and low forcing Sagiri into continuous motion, feet barely landing before pushing off, body twisting through narrow gaps. Nokai never stopped either, always intercepting, always following its master's will to defend, not leaving even a slight window for him to be touched.

The fighting field had now expanded, and Sagiri could feel Yoka and N'varu getting further and further away. He needed to return in their direction. He couldn't afford to go too far, but as things were, he needed to keep moving.

Wherever they made contact, bark split, chips flying, branches snapping under the pressure of their movement. Just then, one Veil Blade planted a foot against a trunk and kicked off into Sagiri's flank. At the same time, another used his partner's back to vault over, dropping behind Sagiri at the exact moment he turned, their coordination compressing the space into a cage of moving angles.

Yet, Sagiri slipped through it, stepping onto a trunk at an angle that had him upside down for a moment before running two strides along it before pushing off into open air, twisting mid-flight as three blades met him there, his body folding around them. Nokai struck once, twice, three times in tight succession, each contact redirecting just enough to survive the next as he landed into a roll and came up already moving, the fight stretching wider through the trees, never slowing, nine against one in a constant surge of motion where the forest itself broke under their passage, and still no side gained ground.

The fight went on for a while. It would most definitely be daybreak soon. No side was giving away too much, even so. They were keeping their cards close to their chest. Sagiri was making sure not to use too much of his strength.

The stalemate was going to keep going on for a while. That was a fact.

"How weak are the veil blades that you can't lay one hit on a sixteen-year-old boy?" Sagiri taunted. The teams had finally broken apart for a moment. Everyone was breathing hard, but the fight was still far from over. After all, it could only end when either side died.

"Don't worry, your friends will be dead soon. " We will be sure to make you watch," one of them answered. And it could have been better if he had not threatened his friends.

Bad move!