

KEEPER 271

Chapter 271 TIME TO DIE

Perhaps Sagiri had played with his food long enough till it had lost its manners. The fight on the three battlefields had reached a peak. Something was bound to give soon. Sagiri had finally mastered most of their fighting pattern, and he had already memorized it.

Just when he was about to move from his position, he felt something. There were more of the bastards closing in on the location. There were like three dozen more now. So this must have been their plan all along. They were a few minutes out of Yoka and N'varu's position. The two might have still been holding their own against the three he left with them, but against three dozen more, that could have been straight up suicide.

"So that was your plan?" Sagiri said.

"It was not specifically a plan, but we already knew we were no match for you. You are the one who made the plan successful, if I must say so," one of them answered triumphantly.

"Well, I must say you are greatly mistaken. You can't keep me here," Sagiri said.

"We know very well you can teleport from place to place. which is why...." another answered.

"Veil formation!!" Another announced.

So that was their plan. To separate them. Before Sagiri could react, however, an invincible force started pressing onto him before a mist so heavy that he had ever felt blanketed the place. It was indeed enough to make it hard for him to push the archive far enough to reach N'varu and Yoka. The markings on his body crawled violently. It was as if he were being caged at the moment.

Nokai tore from Sagiri's hand, but just like Sagiri, thought the veil formation mist was like any formation, difficult to break. It was not enough to kill him, but it could for sure keep him contained for a few minutes, if not seconds, and that was enough time to kill his friends. It was easier to break a formation from the outside, as always.

"So this is your secret weapon," Sagiri said. "But you forgot one thing, not only do you have friends.

Sagiri had felt them coming too. Squad 25. Kiuga must not have been able to keep it from them for long, and Kaka must have pummeled him to a pulp till he told them the real plan. Sagiri had wished to keep them away from real danger. Since he now knew the whole plan and the fighting style of Veil blades, there was no need for him to hold back.

"What..." one of them asked.

"Squad 25 formation!!" It was Kiuga. There did not have a squad 25 formation, but he just had to announce dramatically. The formation was broken in a second. Sagiri used that moment to push the archive out, and with the help of his squad, the nine veil blades went flying.

"Shouldn't you be in war college right now?" Sagiri asked.

"Shouldn't you have killed them a long time ago? What is with this behaviour?" Kaka snarled.

"Well, I had to buy time for you to come save me since you don't follow plans," Sagiri said.

"I should beat you to death, you southerner!" Kaka snapped.

"Just how stupid do you think my bird is?" Pavire joined in. Sagiri knew Pavire's bird could be the one flaw in the plan. It used its eyes, not its nose. Their showing up was only a matter of time. He had wished to have cleared out the veil blades by then, but well, all was not lost.

"Where are N'varu and Yoka?" Zazarie asked. He was pretty observant.

"Right about now, they have at least three seconds before they die," Sagiri said, and everyone gasped.

"What do you mean?" Kiuga asked.

"Hold them back for me. Don't let their blades touch you. We have been at it with them for at least three hours. They are not as strong. Kill them for me," Sagiri said with urgency.

"What about..." Kiuga went to ask.

"One more second. Their defence is their offence. Kiuga, take care of it. Don't die," Sagiri said.

"Don't tell us what we already know." Gavina snapped.

Sagiri pushed the archive out, and in the next instant, he was gone. He landed in the clearing where N'varu and Yoka were still going at it with their opponents.

Sagiri landed in the centre of the clearing at the same time as the needle darts started landing. The three dozen veil blades had landed a second before Sagiri. N'varu and Yoka had only realised it and did not even have time to fall into defensive positions.

"Archive defence!!" Sagiri called, and the archive pushed out its shield. The needles rained on the archive. Sagiri did not hold back this time as he sent them flying this time around. It would soon be daybreak, but the sky was already light.

"Right on time!!" N'varu said, rushing to Sagiri's side together with Yoka. They were out of breath to say the least. They were completely spent.

"Here I thought there would be many sandshades here to protect the keeper," one of the new arrivals said. He looked more menacing and veteran than the other squad. It was clear that the squad that had just arrived was nothing like the one that had been currently there. These were even more hardcore.

"It is none of your business what the sand shades do," N'varu snapped.

"So you fail to protect your master once again, just like the last. If I did not know better, I could have thought that you were offering him up for us to slaughter," he said.

"Yet here he stands unscathed even after engaging your team for hours." N'varu sneered.

"Yet none of them is already dead," the man said. It was clear he was the leader of the squads.

"Do you, veil blades, love to talk this much?" Sagiri said. "If you haven't noticed, it is time to die," Sagiri snarled. There were three dozen of the vermin. He needed to fight while protecting the two with him. This time, he was not going to hold back.

"Your death or ours, N'folu? It's your fate to die like your clan," the leader said, unfazed.

Sagiri yawned. It was time he finally let loose and showed the veil blades that they were not the only ones with killing intent.

"Shall we find out?"

Sagiri's killing intent burst through the clearing enough to cripple anyone. He was tired of being chased. Perhaps it was time he showed his hand now.

Chapter 272 TIME TO DIE II

The killing intent was so thick that the air itself turned stale.

"I will die on the day fate has allocated for me. Anyone who dares take my life before then will have to die!!" Sagiri said.

Nokai!!" Sagiri called. With how much the archive was surging in response to his intention. Nokai split into four. Immediately, the veilblades went on the defence ready to break the impact. They fell into smaller squads of six. Their defence was offence, a million darts started raining in sagiri's direction.

They weren't holding back. All they smelled of death. Well, too bad he was not holding back either.

The four pieces of Nokai attacked four groups of six each relentlessly. It would not come back until it tasted blood. The remaining dozen not engaged rained more darts. These were poisoned. One hit, and one was in trouble. Yoka and N'varu remained behind Sagiri. They would join the fight when he asked them two. At the moment, everything was under control.

The darts rained on the archive. They paused midair as if they were being held by nothing. Sagiri did not just let them fly randomly this time. He aimed for one person. With his left hand, he controlled the shower.

"We are immune to our poisons. " Our needle darts can not harm us," the man Sagiri chose for the shower said as he dodged and ran from the moving mass.

"Oh?" Sagiri said.

He was not a man to use a method that did not work twice in a row either. He had learned that fact before. After the needles he sent back in the first attack, it was impossible that they were able to defend them all. Yet none had collapsed.

"Do you get off on stating facts. How about death by a thousand holes?" Sagiri said, and in that moment, the needles had surrounded the man from all directions.

He did not have time to react before Sagiri folded his fist, and the needles, as if tied to his hand, entered the man from all directions. Blood splattered, but Sagiri did not stop. He tightened his fist until his knuckles turned white. The needles came out from all sides of the man in one go. He fell lifeless, but Sagiri was not yet done. Nokai made contact in that moment, tearing through four veil blades weapons before slashing their heads clean off.

In that momentary pose as the remaining thirty-one watched in surprise, Sagiri had found his opening. More needles had gathered on the archive, and with the ones that were already bloodied. It was a good number. Sagiri found his next opponent immediately. This time, he did not wait for a moment for them to watch before he clasped his fist closed, and the man dropped.

The momentary shock passed for only a moment before the leader spoke again.

"Mist formation!!!" He screamed, but again Sagiri had been a prisoner of the formation once. He could still hear the fight further out. There was blood, and he could only wish it was not one of squad 25. First things first.

He was not going to allow them to make another mist formation.

"No, you don't!!" Sagiri snarled.

Sagiri smacked his fist to the ground with so much force that the ground shook and split braking their formation immediately. He did not stop for a second to allow the veil blades to catch their breath as they tried to avoid sinking alive. He snatched Yoka and N'varu into the archive pocket in that moment before he tore through the air.

Nokai snapped into one and met Sagiri's hand in the midst of his ascent. Sagiri split it in two, even then, as he landed, and with it, he tore through two veil blades through and through. He did not stop but kept moving, waiting with his hands open. The two blades tore through the two and did not stop.

The moment they touched Sagiri's hands, Sagiri crossed his hands and sent them out with force. The three veil blades to his left, trying to escape the uneven ground, did not have time to react before Nokai tore through their necks. Their heads rolled clean off. The one to his right faced the same fate, and before their heads could touch the ground, Sagiri was already moving.

He tore the clearing in a blur, collecting heads like trophies. He needed to move fast, too, because Yoka and N'varu could run out of air soon. Sagiri moved into the next formed clearing until a force hit him in the chest and he flew back, feet scraping on the ground. N'varu and Yoka came tumbling out of the archive immediately.

There now lay boies all over the clearing, and Nokai was red. The red did not stay long, as always before, it went back to its original pale silver colour. The first ray of the sun touched Nokai, and Sagiri finally looked up to see who he had made contact with.

The leader. He was holding a saber in his hand, almost the same size as him. he stood among the fifteen that were left standing after Sagiri's rampage.

"Do you think you are the only one with a clan blade?" His eye twitched.

"The yanki?" N'varu said after finally catching his breath.

"What is it?" Sagiri asked.

"That is the name of the blade. It is among the few infused by blood to be used by those sharing blood from generation to generation. No one survives Yanki. It is known to the Inkali tribe of the south. They are a small clan of almost two hundred."

"An Inkali serving the veil blades. Didn't they kill your past chief?" N'varu scoffed.

"And you are being protected by the keeper when you should be protecting him?" the Inkali said. "The inkali are cowards, and what is the use of having this blade if they don't use it. I will put the thirsty blade to work now!" He said, lifting the blade to point at the three.

"Well, it had been a while since Nokai met a worthy blade." Sagiri raised Nokai and pointed it at him.

So that was the blade he had used to push him back. Even so, the number had reduced. Now it was fourteen against three. It was not a good number, but it was manageable.

"Yanki has never lost. You actually made me use it. I had hoped you would just roll up and die like the rest of your clan, but this is even better," the Inkali said.

"I might just kill you as an apology to your clan!!"

"Call me Sigan!!" the Inkali said before he disappeared from his position. His blade met with Nokai in a clashing impact in the next second that sent Sagiri sliding back a few feet.

What a killing intent and what a force!!

Chapter 273 NOKAI AND YANKI

"You're still not ready to tap out," Sigan said after the first impact. This was the first time Sagiri had fought someone with a blade like that. It was almost exciting, and it made Sagiri feel something more. Or was it Nokai's desire to win against Yanki?

The two exchanged a few more blows, neither blade giving in. The remaining thirteen joined in and went for Yoka and N'varu seven to six. Sagiri was forced to split Nokai into four. He was using two to go against Sigan and the other two to back up his two teammates.

"You are using half a blade to fight me!! You dare disrespect my blade?" Sigan said, his smile growing into one of madness.

"You don't deserve to fight my full blade!" Sagiri returned the sentiment. The two were moving like two blurs, and only the surroundings were feeling the heat.

Sagiri met Sigan in the narrow space between two scarred trunks, and the forest seemed to draw tight around them as Nokai and Yanki collided for the hundredth time, the impact cracking bark behind them as both slid off and returned instantly, faster, sharper, neither giving ground.

Sigan moved first, a sudden step that cut the distance in a blur, Yanki driving in along a tight line toward Sagiri's center, but Sagiri turned with it, Nokai catching and redirecting the force. The two blades screamed against each other before separating just enough for the next exchange to slam in.

Sigan shifted angles mid-motion, his wrist turned, his body folded low, then rose into a second strike that came from a direction Sagiri had just cleared, forcing him to pivot hard. He planted his foot against a trunk to twist out of line. Nokai snapped up to intercept again as wood split beside his head from the force of the miss. The two moved together without pause, stepping off trees, rebounding, cutting through the air in tight arcs that overlapped and collided, each strike answered instantly, each defense turning into another attack.

They moved almost like a deadly spinning wheel.

Sigan pressed forward with relentless precision, Yanki carving fast, controlled lines that forced Sagiri into constant adjustment. Sagiri matched him, Nokai, on both hands, flashing in sharp counters that broke all the attacks.

Both of them seemed to read ahead, anticipating each other's moves, closing openings the moment they formed. They left the ground almost at the same time, meeting mid-air, blades clashing again and again in rapid succession, metal ringing in tight bursts as their bodies twisted around each other. They landed apart only to drive back in, faster now.

The exchanges tightened until there was no separation between attack and defense, just continuous motion where one mistake would be lethal, yet none came, the balance holding on a razor's edge as two blades of equal intent carved through the forest, splitting bark, shattering branches, and still refusing to yield.

This was going to take a while.

Sagiri did not have that time. His two teammates were seconds from death. If only he could capture the remaining veil blades in his archive pocket. Sigan was not giving him that time, however. If only he were using the whole of Nokai, he could have for sure finished the job. Yanki was not to be underestimated at all, and Sagiri knew that now. To some extent, the blade was like Nokai following its master's will.

"You can't save them and fight me at the same time. They are going to die in no time," Sigan said, his smile growing bigger. Even with his now reduced strength, Sagiri still had to do something, or Yoka and N'varu were going to die. He could only hold two in his archive pocket, and that is what he did. The archive pushed out and pulled two into the pocket.

"Not if I suffocate your buddies first," Sagiri said. He could feel the two choking away in the archive pocket. carrying them, however, had repercussions because he was now slower, and Sigan pushed him on the defensive. He was not cornered, but he had slowed down momentarily. Yanki slashed the aid and tore open Sagiri's clothes and his chest. The cut was deep, but not too deep to slow him down.

"Stay back!!" Sagiri roared. The archive hit Sigan with force and sent him back. It wasn't enough to kill him, but it was enough to slow him down. Yoka and N'varu had one less member to deal with, but they were both now wounded.

This was getting deadly.

Yoka, especially, was now cornered. Not even the piece of Nokai was enough to have his back. The surviving veil blades were deadly and most elite. Just when Sagiri thought Yoka could die, someone tore through the tree line.

"Captain!!" he called, getting straight to action and breaking the offence, giving Yoka momentary relief.

Tavora?

Such an impulsive child.

Sagiri needed to end the fight quickly. The wound was not healing, and if he had to guess, Yanki was poisoned.

No!

No time to waste. Sigan joined the fight again. They were now both wounded, and they both knew this was the most critical part of the fight.

Hang in there, everyone.

"You are poisoned. You can not save anyone now." Sigan gloated.

Sagiri felt it instantly, a cold burn spreading from the wound, sharp and wrong, sinking deeper with every heartbeat. Sigan slowed, just a fraction, watching, knowing the poison would do what his blade didn't need to rush.

Sagiri's breath tightened in calculation, the Archive inside him shifting, rising, answering the threat with something heavier. Sagiri rose and got into a menacingly offensive stance.

He stepped forward once, and the rhythm changed. His body moved differently now, each step placed with absolute intent, the flow turning into something precise. Nokai moved with him, in clean, decisive arcs that forced Sigan back for the first time since he put away the two veilblades in the archive pocket.

"I'm going to defeat you with half my blade," Sagiri said. It was not his first time being poisoned. This was not as lethal as the time eating poison, but he could feel it eating at his strength quickly.

Yanki met Nokai again and again, sparks snapping between them as the tempo climbed. Sagiri's steps sharpened into a pattern turn, step, pivot, cut, each movement linking perfectly into the next, faster, tighter, the dance compressing the space between them until there was no room left to disengage.

The forest blurred around them as he pushed forward, every motion fueled by the Archive, every strike carrying weight that broke Sigan's defense, forcing him to adjust, to give ground, to break his own rhythm.

The poison spread, clawing at Sagiri's veins, but he didn't slow. He accelerated, the attacks reaching their peak, movements overlapping into something relentless.

The two inside the archive pocket were refusing to die, to say the least. It would take longer for them to die, and he did not have that long.

Sigan sank into a low stance before he attacked again. He moved like a blur, but Sagiri did not miss him. The archive spat the two in his archive pocket just as Sigan landed an attack. He split his two buddies in two. Yanki was lethal indeed, and the cut was deadly. Sagiri used the opening to charge forward, cutting, already inside Sigan's open defence, his final step landing with absolute certainty as Nokai carved through the last line of defence in a single, flawless motion.

Nokai sank into Sigan's heart. Even though Yanki had taken his two opponents, he still managed to slice Sagiri's shoulder as he thrust his blade deeper.

Silence.

"You lost my half-blade!" Sagiri laughed, but coughed up blood.

"And you will die from the freezing tongue in a few minutes." Sigan laughed an evil cackle before his eyes rolled to the back of his head. And he fell back.

"No wonder you could never wield the full strength of this blade. Clan betrayer." Sagiri said as he fell to one knee. How dare he coat such a blade with poison? Sagiri stabbed Nokai to the ground to keep himself steady. If a true wielder of Yanki had been the one to fight Sagiri, perhaps he could have unleashed its full strength, and Sagiri would have had to use his full blade.

Such a pity.

"Captain, no!!" Just then, Tavora's voice tore through the clearing, snapping Sagiri to his senses immediately.

Chapter 274 MASTERS OF WHISPERS

"Captain, no!!" Tavora's voice tore through the clearing, snapping Sagiri to his senses immediately.

Yoka had been hit, and he lay unmoving. Tavora was now trying to hold his ground against the six. He was good, but he was still no match. Yoka was still trying to crawl but fell for the third time. N'varu was surprisingly holding his own. The southern style he was using was fast and lethal. Even so, Sagiri could smell his tiredness, and soon, he was going to wear off, and then the veil blades were going to kill him.

Sagiri could feel a presence of the approaching in a rush. They were still far out to make it in time. Something was wrong on their end, too, and Sagiri could feel it.

The battlefield was at a very critical moment. Sagiri tried to move, but his energy was almost gone. He could move within the archive because it had retracted back to try to heal him or keep him alive. He retched another mouthful of blood.

This was not the time!!

Time seemed to stand still and move in slow motion. N'varu was growing tired. His movements became sluggish, and soon he was getting cornered. Sagiri watched in slow motion as Tavora tried to protect Yoka and failed. He could not move as he watched for a moment as an attack aimed at Tavora's throat.

Sagiri could not blink even as the poison ate at him, eating away the remaining strength he had.

Tavora was going to die. The boy had gotten on Sagiri's nerves again and again, yet as he stood seconds from death, Sagiri did not wish him death. In the last moment, however, a blur of shadow moved.

Yoka.

He used the last of his strength to move and pushed Tavora out of the way. The hand- attached blade tore into his midsection in a moment, but in that moment, Yoka drove his blade into the assassin. He spat blood from his lips as he choked away his last sign of life.

A moment of silence.

A scream tore through the place.

"Captain!! No!!"

Sagiri did not know if that was Tavora's scream or his, but just like always, when he was at the edge, a darkness took root inside of him. It did not care whether he was poisoned. His heart turned to ice, and his pupils darkened.

"Sagiri nooo!!" N'varu had never felt such cold killing intent. It was so cold that there was no warmth in it. Sagiri did not have the strength to fight the ice and darkness in his heart.

He rose to his feet, his consciousness slipping away. The veil blades could not believe what they were seeing, and they could instantly feel the change in the air.

This was bad.

A moment as sagiri's gates of consciousness slipped away, and he would be just a moving destruction. Suddenly, however, just moments from the impending tragedy, blurs dressed in white flowy attire, blending into daylight, broke into the clearing. They did not have blades, but carried killing intent.

Their aura, however, was almost too peaceful. So peaceful that Sagiri regained some of his control.

White ropes moved into the clearing, just a squad of 25 broke through the clearing. They did not know who the enemy was, but as they watched the white string circle and cage the enemy and take them prisoner, they paused.

Even Sagiri, who was ready to unleash destruction, paused to watch the majestic arrival. Their attacks looked like a graceful dance, but their palms crippled whoever they touched and rendered them unable to fight. They were not killing the veil blades, but within minutes, the ten still alive were bound.

When they finally stopped moving, is when Sagiri could see them clearly. They wore white pants that looked so delicate with every touch of the wind. A shawl covered their heads, neck, and rested on their shoulders. The remainder flowed all the way down to their feet. Their upper bodies were covered, still in the same shawl, making them look even more delicate. ten in total. Three maidens and seven men.

The man standing at the head of the group. Stood looking around the clearing until he saw Sagiri.

"Our apologies for being the keeper and chief of the N'folu. The veiled speaker, one of the thirteen in the council of the south, tasked us with finding you and ensuring your safe passage south!" He announced before he sank to one knee, and the other followed. "I, Siyia, leader of the sixth troop of Masters of Whispers, greet you."

Sagiri did not know whether to laugh or cry.

"The south sends assassins to kill me, and then sends you to give me safe passage?" Sagiri sneered. "Do the South perhaps think I don't deserve to go home, or do they deem me stupid."

"We only answer to the veiled speaker. We are the masters of whispers. That is the only way we knew assassins had been sent after we were given the order to search for you."

"I greet Siyia, leader of the sixth troupe." N'varu sank to his knees to return the bow.

"Where are the other sand shades? Did you come alone to protect the keeper?" Siyia said. The sentence was not accusative in manner of speaking, but N'varu knew better.

"We dare not kill a chief of the south." Siyia did not wait for N'varu to answer.

Sagiri looked like he wanted to answer, but he fell back in the last second, and N'varu gasped in horror.

"He is poisoned by the freezing tongue. I can smell it from here. It will swell his tongue in a minute and kill him." Siyia said, rising to his feet and starting walking towards Sagiri. Just like everything the masters whispered, it was graceful and unhurried.

"Sagiri noo!!" N'varu cried, closing the distance to Sagiri.

"Stay back!!" Siyia stopped N'varu.

"Kia, give him the antidote and tend his wounds," Siyia said to one of the females on the team, and she moved quickly.

"What is that? What are you going to give him?!" N'varu was as protective as ever.

"If anyone wants to kill him at this moment, they surely can. If we don't give him this antidote, he will be dead in seconds anyway." Siyia said unhurried but with command. N'varu trembled before he stepped back. Kia stepped forward.

"Captain!!" Tavora screamed, holding Yoka's lifeless body close to his chest. "Save my captain, please!!" he cried. Siyia crossed over to him and laid his fingers on Yoka's neck.

"He is dead," Siyia said, standing to his feet. Tavora wailed and hugged Yoka even closer.

"Squad 25 tore into the clearing, too. Kiuga's unmoving body rested on Kaka's hands, and Lira lay in Maita's.

"They are still alive but poisoned..." Kaka said in a small voice. Siyia nodded to his juniors to go help them out, but he made his way to the now bound assassins.

"The veil blades. I have been looking for your hideout for a while. If you tell me where it is, I will let you go." His voice was calm but chilling.

"The veil blades won't tell you anything even if you torture us," one of them said before he bit his tongue. The others followed in unison. Siyia watched it all happen, but he did not seem fazed.

"As expected of the veil blades. We have what they want now. They will be sure to come out of hiding now." Siyia said with a chilling smile, a sharp contrast to his calm demeanor.

Chapter 275 TOLI

"I want to go to the sea and watch father fish." Toli Said.

"No, you won't, you have one year before you can become a full man," Veve said to his son. After all, for their tribe, only men who were initiated to become true men could be allowed to go into the sea. Noraya is a small tribe on Neshiro Island, south of N'kara.

"But big brother Ayiko is down there with dad," Toli said.

"He is two years older than you, so he can go fishing with the men," Veve answered. Toli was bothering him in the cooking area yet again. Men went to the sea, and women raised the clan, yet Toli did not always follow the tradition of following the other boys to learn the ways of the sea. He was always in the cooking area near the pots with Veve, asking him questions from morning till dusk.

Toli was only ten, almost turning eleven, but he would have to wait until he turned twelve so that he could officially join the men of Noraya in their sea expedition. He was, however, a very untamed child, going out of his way to do whatever he liked, and even Veve knew she would not be able to keep him tied for long.

Toli, after all, was named after the falcon. the fastest bird. He was meant to fly over oceans and mountains and distances without restraint.

It was the way of the small tribe of Noraya. Fishing, making ornaments from sea stones and shells, and even hunting for valuables from deep in the sea. It would be shameful for a man to be unable to swim in Noraya and hunt deep in the sea, even in parts where there were deep-sea beasts.

Toli's father, Mawi, was one of the best swimmers and sea hunters of Noraya. To show it off, his hands were marred with the marks of the teeth of a sea beast. He even wore a huge tooth on his neck to show

his valor and his achievement. He had killed one of the biggest sea beasts in his youth. woka. The deadliest fish. He always told Toli stories of how it bit through his hand gear made of sea stone and dragged him under the sea. Not only did he manage to hold his breath underwater for almost an hour, but he also managed to kill it. He emerged from within its remains when its dead body floated.

The whole tribe had gotten at least a piece of woka to cook. How treacherous, right? A fish so deadly also has the sweetest meat. Mawi then took the tooth that Woka had used to bite him and wore it as a souvenir. He gave one to his father, brothers, and the older men of the clan. Mawi had always told Toli that if he ever managed to swim to the bottom of the sea and touch the centre stones, then he would give him the tooth hanging on his neck. He also said the same to Ayiko.

To swim to the centre stoned always takes years and years of diving in the deep seas to be able to achieve such a feat.

"But Mom, won't Ayiko get a leg up on me. He might be able to grow stronger and touch the centre stones of the seas before me and get Dad's woka tooth." Toli whined.

"If he gets it, then won't my brave Toli kill a woka and take one for himself?" Veve said with a laugh. Toli's eyes widened with joy.

"You think I can kill Woka?" Toli was beside himself.

"Of course. You are Mawi's son. Ayiko is, too. You can kill your own woka. You don't have to wait for dad's." Veve said.

"I will grow stronger than my father. I will swim to the deep seas and touch the centre stones, then I will go to the nest of Woka and kill the beast. No, I will kill two and have many teeth and use one to make you a beautiful ornament." Toli's face lit up.

"Won't you make one for your wife instead. Your father makes ornaments for me, so you make those for your wife." Veve said he was still moving around the cooking area, while Toli followed her, almost walking over her skirts.

"I won't marry. I will stay with you, Mom, forever. Who will protect you if I get married?" Toli said. He always said that.

"Your father will protect me. Don't you think he's strong?" Veve teased, and the boy pouted.

"Well, when you and father grow old..." Toli started, and Veve laughed. It was impossible to win that.

"A man has to marry. You can stay with me together with your wife. Don't you like that girl of the Kama clan?" Veve asked, and Toli blushed.

"She... She is very beautiful but already betrothed," Toli whined.

"But she will only marry the strongest man. Look at me. I married your father because he was the strongest. I was already betrothed then. Girls are always betrothed so that more prospects can fight for the position."

"You think I will be the strongest?" Toli asked.

"I know you will be," Veve said. "Now go to the clan school and learn ways of the sea."

"But I already know everything..." Toli whined.

"Go then learn something you don't know," Veve said. She already knew it was futile to tell Toli to learn something he already knew. The boy was smart and easily bored. If he had to pretend to learn something he already knew, he would just cause trouble.

Toli lit up before leaving. He had finally gotten permission from his mother. Veve knew the boy's errands. He always went to swim in the many deep places of the island with the older boys who were yet to turn into men, but who were almost there. Toli, being big for his age, always fit in.

So was the life of Toli, but soon he was able to touch the deep ends of the spots they went to swim. They are shallow, considered to be the sea itself, but after you touch the bottom one too many times, it becomes boring. Toli was easily bored with things he already knew.

That is why, as the next fishing and sea hunting season began and the men of Noriya were ready to take their ships and go into the deep sea for days, weeks, or even a month at most, Toli did something he had been desiring to do. He knew they could not throw him into the seas if they found him too late.

Toli snuck into his father Mawi and his men's trap box. It was so heavy that it required at least four men to carry it. It was meant to carry traps and nets used to capture the fish. Toli already regretted it as soon as the box was put in the lower deck with other boxes, but it was too late to go back now. He could breathe, but he was lying in a fetal position.

Of course, after the ship set sail and it was a good distance away from the island, Toli crawled out of the box and hid in a better place under the deck where he could watch Mawi and the other men.

He had not thought of how he was going to eat yet and hide for the whole week, but... just as the ship was deep enough into the seas that the men could let down their nets and dive in to hunt, even Toli had not expected it to take such a twisted turn.

He saw the new arrival as they jumped into the boat and then...

The gore that followed had Toli frozen so much that he was not able to move. The savages of that day did not stop until every last man on the ship was dead, even Ayiko. Blood flowed like water into the deck. Toli watched as the Woka tooth was stripped off his father's neck and the other smaller beast teeth from the other men's necks.

These things don't break. They will indeed make our master a non-breakable weapon," one of them said, and Toli gasped.

The slaughter of his people was to make a weapon?!

"Find all the other ships of Noraya and strip them of the sea beast teeth!!" The man ordered, and Toli froze.

Was he dreaming? Was this a bad dream? But then he soon realized it wasn't when the man gave the last order.

"Burn the ship and all the Noraya ships at sea!!"

Toli did not move even long after they were gone, and the ship was covered with flames. Long after his father and brother were covered with flames. Until the place he lay started burning. Yet even then, he did not have the strength to move.

END OF BOOK THREE

Chapter 276 THE WAY

The sand wiped across his face as he stared into the distance.

"We were not able to find his location, but we have a lead on the hidden prisons of the western capital," Mina said. She was among the spies that had been sent out yet again to look for Koru.

Sagiri had expected these words, and he was not fazed.

"Without the Shadow, the Crown will fall into madness. With the Shadow, the Crown may fall in love and perish. To save the world, one must die."

The words myama had said had been weighing on him of late. Well, they had been weighing on him since he saw her tattoo.

It had been a year since Sagiri had left the north. He was now at the edge of the south. Thousands of vaara from the Tagayia border, but still thousands from the heart of the south. Sagiri needed to have contact with Koru as soon as possible. That was not the only reason Sagiri had decided not to go further into the south.

He recognized that he had enemies who wanted him dead, even in the South, though for different reasons than the North. For the North, it was because of fear, but for the South, it was because of jealousy. He had quickly learned that the South worked in a different way. The four tribes of the south, where N'folu was one of them, each had a chief who sat on the ruling council. The N'folu seat had been empty for sixteen years. Even so, it was not left vacant, and a man had been holding the position. A man of the Mazuku tribe, whose clan was a powerhouse of the south, had taken it upon himself to take the seat. His brother, being the chief of the Mazuku tribe, the two, had been leading the council by the nose, but no one had dared complain.

Well, Sagiri had no interest in politics. The N'folu had not been interested in them either, and their seat had always been neutral in all matters. The keepers especially did not touch politics. Sagiri, being a keeper, was not to take part in politics. Even so, his returning to the south with the Tatani tribe had caused discontent, and Siyia had soon left to go back and report to his master. After all, his duty was done. He was tasked with bringing him safely south, and his duty was done.

Sagiri had asked about Koru. Siyia, a leader of a troupe of the whisper masters, could surely know where Koru was.

"The whispers I hear are only meant for my master's ears." Siyia had said. The man was peaceful but cunning. Whisperers were currency to them, and they were rich.

"I know I must pay for the whippers. State your price. He was my mother's sand shade. I know he is alive. I will find him either way." Sagiri said.

"I save you, yet you threaten me." Siyia had feigned innocence, but Sagiri could tell that the man wanted to bargain. He desired something so deep that Sagiri could almost taste it on his lips.

"You can count it as two favours if you tell me where he is. You name them, and if they are within my capabilities, I will achieve them." Sagiri said.

"The price for a whisper is too high. What if I want the weapon you wield?" Siyia teased.

"You cannot wield Nokai. You are not a N'folu and neither a Ngaru. She only answers to the keepers. The masters of whispers know that much, don't they?" Sagiri asked.

"The whispers only know what we hear. N'folu had always kept to themselves. We don't have many whispers on them. Perhaps now I know." Siyia said.

"Speak then. Or I can just go through your memories." Sagiri said. Part of him meant it, but he did not yet want to be enemies with the veiled speaker and his whispers troupes.

"You are too cruel. Not like the N'folu who could never harm a fly," Siyia had laughed. He was not fazed by the threat either.

"Well then. A little birdie told me he is in the loins of the capital in a prison." Siyia said.

"The South has two capitals, which one? That is like telling me to look for a needle in a haystack." Sagiri said.

"Well, that is for you to find out. The east capital and the west capital are, after all, one thing." Siyia said. Sagiri just sighed. If he thought N'varu was tight-lipped, then he was mistaken. Everyone and everything in the south was kept so close to the chest.

"No, what do you wish me to repay you?" Sagiri had asked, even though he had not gotten the answers he wanted.

"I wish you to find someone for me," Siyia said, and for a minute, a slight feeling from deep inside made its way to his eyes. rage.

"If you want to kill someone, you are a capable fighter and know all the whispers of the south. I fear you are in a better position to find them," Sagiri said.

"Well, a deal is a deal."

"Who do you want me to find for you?" Sagiri sighed.

"I will tell you when you are done with all the shit you just stepped into. When you have solved your problems and perhaps taken your seat, then you will be worthy to know who I seek. Well, that is if you are still alive by then." Siyia had said. He and his troupe had left for the eastern capital then, and true to his words, Sagiri's troubles had begun.

The council of the south had sent word that he was to kill all the Tatani, then proceeded to the capital alone. He had sent word back then telling the council he was a member of it by right, and they did not have the right to order him around. He had made it clear that anyone who dared come to the arid lands of the south of the barren lands and into the southern desert to seek him would not return alive.

No one had dared move north again, but life had not gotten any easier for the Tatani who had come south with him. They had made homes north of the desert. They had survived underground where nothing could grow, and they had adapted rather quickly to the vicious environment.

There was, however, brewing tension, and Sagiri knew he had to find Koru quickly before everything went to dust. His spies had not managed to break into the two capitals yet, but they had mapped the area and in the past eleven months, and finally they had found a way for Sagiri to enter the western capital of the south.

They had not been able to find out anything about Koru, however, as long as he could get into the capital. He would easily find him. He was going in blind, but standing still was no longer an option.

Too much time had passed.

Chapter 277 SAND CRABS

"Shouldn't you wait for your sandshade before you go south to the capital?" Seya asked. She had been truly immaculate the previous year, and she had been holding her people together.

"I can't wait one more year," Sagiri answered.

"Why did you allow him to remain in the north then? Shouldn't he be like your shadow?" Seya wondered. She had been wondering about that for a long time.

During the fight with the veil blades, a year back, Sagiri was poisoned. Even with the antidote, it took him three days to wake up. Tavora had already returned north with his general when he finally woke up.

Turns out the rest of the Yoka squad had come looking too, and they had followed Tavora. They returned north with the body of their general. Kiuga and Lira were still unconscious when he woke up. It took them another three days for them to wake up because, unlike him, they did not heal quickly.

In that time, he had to bid them goodbye because he would be heading south, and they would have to return to the college. Kaka was not into the idea, but even he knew it was necessary.

"I come with you. There is no reason for me to stay north anymore," N'varu had said.

"No, you stay in the north. The others with you also stay in the north. There is nothing more for you to do in the south for now."

"But I can't just leave you..."

"Yes, you can. You can not protect me in battle. You can protect me in some other way. Do you understand?" Sagiri had to make N'varu understand. He had to stay in the north and keep spying now.

Sagiri knew the boy was capable of leaving the academy and going unnoticed in a place he shouldn't be. Just as the masters of whispering used information as currency, Sagiri needed an ear in the north.

"He is more useful in the north. Besides, my parents are yet to come south. The shadow general has not met his end of the bargain."

"You are indeed stupid, trusting a Tagayian," Seya said. The sun was almost setting, and the small village that had formed was still alive. The fighters had been training hard, and Seya and sagiri. He had halved them in their previous fight, but there were at least a thousand capable fighters left. At the moment, they were setting off to go deep into the eastern desert. It did have poisonous scorpions, but what they were looking for were the sand crabs. They are delicious and fleshy, and they have been the main meal of the people for a while.

Sagiri could lead the hunt as always. He had yet to make trading allies or friends in the south, so they could not get anything more. Well, Tatani thrived in harsh conditions, and they were flourishing. "Sure, I was stupid. But I expected that much. After his men reported what had happened, he would be stupid not to hold one over my head." Sagiri said.

"Yet you went?" Seya shook her head in disbelief.

"Would you rather be living in that hole right now? Your skin has some colour on it from the sun now."

"You do know I am way older than you. But if you insist, I can wait till you turn eighteen in a few months." Seya said. She was a nasty old rant.

"Let me go south with you then," Seya said after a while. The two had grown to become something like partners.

"You remain here and protect your people if anything happens," Sagiri said. The people still insisted on calling him their chief, but Seya still did most of the work. Since Sagiri turned seventeen, the darkness inside of him had grown. Even when he was not angry, he could still feel it in the corner of his brain. Pressing. Continuously pressing as if it wanted to be let loose.

Sagiri had had to go into seclusion deep in the dunes for weeks on end to calm the brewing battle inside of him. Since he had not been involved in any fight since he moved south, he had managed to keep the darkness at bay, but he did not know for how long. He was sure that something he did not understand was happening inside of him. Only Koru could understand.

Now he was beginning to understand the dream he had years ago of a darker version inside of him. It seemed to grow with age, too. That was the scary part. Just like Seya said, he would be turning in a few months, and somehow turning another year older made him stand on edge. He needed to find Koru before that happened.

"You are the chief now. They are our people." Seya corrected.

"Whatever. Shouldn't you be leading the hunt tonight?" Sagiri said he needed to calm his mind even further, or this thinking about turning eighteen soon was making him more and more worried.

"I led the hunt yesternight while you were hiding somewhere thinking about romance. It is your turn today. Besides, I have to teach the ladies illusions. We can't depend on a boy who trusts a Tagayian to protect us forever." Seya taunted. Sagiri sighed. Perhaps she was more right than she thought. He might just be unable to protect anyone for long. Even himself if something did not change soon enough.

"Oh, it's my turn again." Sagiri sighed before he jumped down from the high rock he had been standing on. Seya was turning the rocks around into houses. This, being the tallest, was still under construction.

He landed right in front of the thousand or so fighters waiting to go deep in the desert to get sand crabs. There were already too many in store, but Seya was not satisfied.

"Everyone ready?" Sagiri asked. The men had come to accept him and respect him. He looked at their feet to make sure everyone wore the high boots. Just going into the desert without them would be a tragedy. If the poisonous scorpions did not kill the first, then the crabs could make them suffer, or even worse, they wouldn't be able to move at all.

"Yes, chief," they answered in unison.

"We move out then," Sagiri said.

He pulled out Nokai before he charged deep into the east side of the desert. He hated to admit it, but these nights, just hunting for sand crabs, were enjoyable.

Chapter 278. DEPARTURE

The hunt ended rather quickly. Sagiri had grown stronger and even faster since he came south. He did not need to use the archive most of the time. It was like the south, or rather the desert, was making him stronger. Now he understood why Myama had been weakened in the north. Even when he performed the desert dance this time, he almost got buried under the amount of sand that rose to meet him.

He somehow felt nostalgic about leaving the clan, but he was going to have to cross the desert to go south. They might have lived at the start of it, but it could be said they lived in the barren lands. He was going to be untouchable in it. He knew that, and it would take a fool to take him on in the desert.

Sagiri walked into his chief's allocated house. He needed to gather his things and leave soon. This could be his last hunt with the tribe for a while, and he did not know when he could be back. Things had a tendency to go from bad to worse, especially in capitals.

"As soon as he stepped in, he was greeted by the woman sprawled on his bed. seya. It looked like she had been waiting for him.

"Shouldn't you be training your ladies?" Sagiri said, unfazed, before he closed the door behind him.

"You see a beautiful woman lying on your bed, and that is the first thing you ask about," Seya said, sitting up slowly before she stood up.

"I don't see a woman?" Sagiri taunted, going to pour himself a glass of water.

"You are so cold sometimes, I wonder if you are an old man or just a seventeen-year-old boy. I came to pack your bag." Seya said, tapping a bag that was beside her on the bed. It was neither too big nor too small.

"I don't need a bag. I can just cross the desert in a day." Sagiri said.

"That is why I packed this bag for you. The desert might love you but it can still kill you." Seya said.

"You act like a pervert, then act like my mother." Sagiri snickered, walking around Seya to sit on the bed. He wanted to sleep for an hour or two before he left, or at least calm his mind further.

"I can be whatever you choose."

There was a bit of silence.

"How many days do you think you will be gone for?" Seya asked after a while/ she was a woman who did not show emotion, but at the moment, Sagiri could feel her sadness.

"Don't tell me you are going to miss me?" Sagiri said, shutting his eyes to give the woman some courtesy. She hated being seen as vulnerable. She gasped and opened her mouth to say something, but shut it. Two more heartbeats went by before she spoke.

"You know the southern tribes have not attacked because they are scared of you. If you stay away for long, they might attack in your absence." Seya said.

"I know, but only you know I am leaving tonight. Just tell the clan I am in the dunes for my seclusion again. I won't abandon you." Sagiri said.

"Who is worried about you abandoning them..."

"You are my tribe now, so I will surely come back. All of us here lost our tribes. So you need not worry." Sagiri said, and Seya paused. Her heartbeat skyrocketed a bit before it steadied.

"What else did you want to say? You didn't come all the way here just to pack my bags and kiss me goodbye..."

"I want to get in touch with The Iron Matron," Seya said. We need weapons.

"And you think the iron matron will just sell them to you. Just like any southerner, you know she is loyal to the South."

"I am buying, and she is selling. You are the chief of the south, she should sell weapons to you if you will it."

"Are you planning to use me to scare the woman? That will not work. Besides, we don't have any money to buy her loyalty." Sagiri said.

"I know that. I have my ways." Seya said in a cold voice.

sagiri snapped his eyes open to find the gleesome look on Seya's face.

"You plan on sticking her in an illusion?" Sagiri said, but he was not shocked in the slightest.

"She will kill you if she finds out," Sagiri said.

"You dare underestimate me?"

"I won't dare. You do whatever you have to do. I trust your insight. Just don't overdo it." Sagiri yawned. Seya was a capable chief, more capable than him when it came to ruling. He was just the name, and she held all the reins.

"Now leave. I want to sleep. Or do you need to watch me sleep?" Sagiri said, falling back on the mattress and sweeping his hand around to turn off the candles.

Seya walked out after a moment. When her presence was way across the small village, Sagiri sat up. He did not need to sleep anymore. He needed to go and come back before Seya caused too much trouble. With that, Sagiri sat up, dressed for the desert weather, and carried the bag Seya had packed for him. He just hoped there was nothing questionable inside.

He moved to the highest rock and looked at the village one more time before he jumped down. The desert stirred when he stepped deeper into it.

"You be nice to the village while I am gone." Sagiri whispered to the desert. He breathed in one more time before he tore south. Mina had given him the final map, and all he had to do now was follow it. The night wind was sharp and ate into his bones as he moved.

The desert stirred around him, pushing him to go farther. He was even faster in the desert. It was five hours before dawn, and he hoped he would be halfway through at this speed.

Chapter 279. BEAUTY

Sagiri must have underestimated the desert because the place was much bigger than he had expected. He needed food and water. Seya was right. Sagiri paused and unzipped his bag. There was a desert hat, some water, and some food.

After eating, Sagiri started moving south again. The sun was going to be relentless now, and he would need dawn the following day to touch civilization, according to Seya. The sand guardian had his bases across the place, but it was easy for Sagiri to avoid each one.

Suddenly, however, something stirred in the archive, and Sagiri stopped. Something tumbled out of the archive right at that moment.

Myama's offspring.

The egg had been acting weird ever since they moved south. It had grown bigger and bigger each day and stirred randomly or just jumped out. Sagiri let it rest in the sand for a little while.

"Really? You want to busk in the sun right now? We have to leave, you know," Sagiri huffed. "If your mother could see your childish behavior now, what would she think?"

He made a move to grab the egg, but it rolled away. It had never done that before, but it seemed like it was in a mood for mischief.

"You little delinquent!! I will leave you here!" Sagiri threatened, rubbing his brows in frustration. He started to move away, expecting the egg to jump into the archive pocket, but it remained steady. He could not abandon Myama's offspring, no matter how troublesome it was getting.

He turned back and glared at it.

"I should cook you and forget about you!" Sagiri cursed and crouched low. He was going to pretend to give up the chase, and when the egg calmed down, he would jump for it. Sagiri's eye twitched as he snuck a peek at the egg from the side of his eye. Any moment now. Three heartbeats and he would grab the little delinquent.

Three...

Dum!

Two...

Dum!

one!

He jumped across the sand, hands open. Only his hands grabbed nothing, and instead, he grabbed a handful of sand, and another mouthful went into his mouth in the awkward position he fell into.

You, little!

Sagiri did not count this time and kept jumping round and round. Before Sagiri realised it, it had turned into a game of cat and mouse, and the little rat did not want to be caught. By the end of it, Sagiri looked like he had used the sand to shower.

Sagiri finally stopped chasing the egg, and it sat proudly in the sand as if to mock him. The sun was starting to peek through the horizon. The first rays touched the egg, and Sagiri's eyes widened. This was the first time he had seen it out under the sun. There were small, invisible cracks around the shell that were now even more visible. Not only that, but the shell was reflecting the sun and absorbing its light.

It reflected off in different colours that were so beautiful to see.

"Wow..." Sagiri marveled.

"Why didn't you just say you wanted to bask in the sun?" Sagiri said in a breathless voice. The egg was beautiful indeed. He sat down and kept his eyes on the egg. The cracks on it grew bigger and bigger, and then they broke and curved inwards.

Wait! Sagiri's eyes widened.

A little thing emerged from the shell in that moment with small amber eyes.

Its body was coated with small scales that glowed silently with every touch of the sun. Its slit eyes looked around before they rested on Sagiri. Sagiri did not move. He couldn't. He was too busy staring at Myama's offspring. Such a little beauty.

"Such a beauty..." Sagiri gasped again. It was difficult to look away from the little thing. He did not realize it, but a tear had formed at the edge of his eye, and he let it fall. He still remembered Myama's farewell, and now seeing her offspring made his heart swell.

"Myama... You have a child." Sagiri whispered.

The little snake crawled out of its enormous shell. By the size of the shell, Sagiri had thought that it could be bigger, but it looked to be the size of his middle finger in length and even thinner. Sagiri could not even begin to think the little beast could grow to be Myama's size. Sand poured from inside the shell before the entire shell dissolved to become uniform with the sand.

"Come now, let's go then," Sagiri said after a while of the little shit not moving towards him.

"I know you can hear me, Myama's offspring." It turned to him slightly but looked away again.

"You want a name?" Sagiri said after seeing how much attitude the little snake was giving him. It was only a few seconds old, and it was already making him suffer.

The snake turned to him when he said that. Now what name should I give you? Sagiri thought.

"You are beautiful even with your bad attitude. Maybe I should call you beauty," Sagiri said, and he could have sworn the little shit rolled its eyes.

"Zaira!" Sagiri called. It means beauty.

The little snake turned to him fully as if it could not believe his bad taste in naming, but the next second, it was wrapped around his middle finger. Sagiri had almost forgotten that it could not stay in the archive pocket any longer now that it needed to breathe.

"You are going to be trouble, and I feel it. What do you even eat?" Sagiri asked, but the little delinquent did not even stir, and in fact, it shut its eyes.

"I am going to give you to Koru once I find him. I can't babysit you until you grow some manners, at least." Sagiri chastised, but he knew deep down he was now attached to beauty.

Sagiri started to move again, a bit slower this time. He did not even make it far before he heard the cry of a bird.

"Perhaps I should let this eagle eat you," Sagiri taunted. Even so, he did not stop. It was a bit odd for an eagle to be this deep in the forest, especially this type, but well, what did he know about birds? The bird, however, kept following him for another hour or two. Slowing down when he did and moving fast when he did.

That was now odd.

Finally, Sagiri stooped, and the bird came to a stop too.

"Are you following me? I am not going to let you eat Zaira. Maybe in the future. Now go away." Sagiri said, but the bird flew even lower before it came to perch in front of him. Now that it was not airborne, he could see a little collar on its neck, and a note was attached to it. Not only that, but he also recognized the bird.

Pavire's bird.

"It is you. You are awfully far from Tagayia," Sagiri said. Why was every beast trying to slow his journey down?

The bird bowed its head, making the note even more visible, and Sagiri went to strip it. It did not even wait for him to read before it rose and took flight.

Now what is it?

Sagiri unraveled the note and groaned deeply.

How bad could the timing of everyone be!

Chapter 280. BONI VALLEY I

The freaking Boni valley? What the hell could anyone be doing in the Boni Valley?

Boni Valley was one of the oldest deadlands recorded in the histories of Tagayia, a vast depression of stone and broken earth enclosed by towering cliffs that stretched for leagues in every direction. The valley possessed only a single known entrance, a narrow passage cut through black rock where the walls tightened. Beyond that pass, the land opened suddenly into an immense interior of forests, ravines, ruins, and uneven plains that no map had ever fully captured. For centuries, Boni carried a deadly reputation.

Some said that an ancient beast lived there, and others said that a warring tribe lived there. There are many speculations around boni. Some even said a demon lived there, and others said it was a portal to the underworld. Expeditions entered it and vanished. Scouts sent to recover them vanished as well. Entire war parties disappeared without a trace beyond the pass, leaving behind no survivors, no messages, and no bodies.

Over time, the valley became less a place and more a warning spoken in the mouths of people, just like a myth. The deeper one entered Boni, the harder it became to understand direction, distance, or escape, and because there was only one way in and one way out, retreat itself often became impossible. In history, it was written. Those who entered Boni rarely returned, and those who did never spoke of what they had seen within.

Sagiri had heard about boni from Rusha. After all, it was deep in the east, to the legs of Tagayia, almost stepping on the head of the south. There had even been rumours that it was the southerners who had infected the valley. Even so, Boni Valley did not hold any threat, at least for anyone who did not go in. All anyone had to do was stay away from Boni, and they would never be in any sort of predicament or just disappear.

That is why, as sagiri stood in the glaring sun of the desert, he wondered what possessed Squad 25 to go into Boni Valley. What could possess college students to go to such a place? He had never regretted his words so much.

It had been an emotional departure back then, and he had sworn that he would still be a part of the squad even in absentia. He had also opened his big mouth and made a promise that whenever the squad was in trouble, he would show up whenever and wherever if they called him, and he would be there for them. any day, any time. The promise applied to the four girls. After Lira had almost died for him, it had naturally evened the scales with her.

He had not granted her wish of helping her remember, however, but he said if they ever met again and she had not changed her mind about being his ally, then he would help. Well, if she hadn't already remembered.

It had been a year since he made the stupid promise, and now they had to pick a time when he needed to go to the capital to rescue his mother's guardian. Even damned Zaira chose the very moment to be hatched, and now it was sleeping on his finger. It had not stirred again.

What to do? What to do? He could just go to the capital and hope that he would find Koru and then hurry north and rescue them. He did not know how many days it could take him to find Koru in the capital, however. Both capitals of the south are huge, and it could take him at least a week to scale one.

He did not know whether squad 25 could survive till then. The message was no doubt sent by Kiuga. The college students were on an exercise. Students could choose at will whether to go in squads or all alone. It is a college exercise that lasts a month. Most students did it in squads because who goes merit hunting without a squad? If it were up to Kaka, then perhaps he could go alone, but he and Kaka could not be separated, and Kiuga was like a head whom everyone followed. It seemed that Squad 25 and Gavina's squad were together on this mission.

Kiuga had not left that out. The note was small and annoying.

We are jaws at the doors of death in Boni Valley, where we have been trapped for a week. Even your wife and your girlfriend are here. If you delay, you might never see my beautiful face again.

Who even says such obnoxious things? But Sagiri knew that if Kiuga had to personally ask him for help, then the strategist was at the end of his wits.

"What do you think, Zaira? Should I denounce anything to do with this squad this time and cut links with them?" Sagiri said, but even thinking about going separate ways with the squad made his heart stir uncomfortably.

He would help this time and then beat them to a pulp for even daring to go to such a place. Just how many merits could a man want? If Sagiri could guess that the squads had followed each other because they were bitter rivals and could let no one get ahead.

They were going to die one day just for this stupidity.

Sagiri stopped only long enough to look toward the horizon, the desert stretching endlessly beneath the morning light, dunes rolling like waves under the wind. His loose desert robes shifted around him in the heat, layered sand-colored cloth wrapped tightly at the waist, while lighter outer fabric moved freely with the wind to keep the heat off his body, and over his face rested the black desert mask that concealed everything below his eyes, shielding him from sand and heat alike.

With a sigh, he turned northeast and moved. Sand burst beneath his feet as he accelerated instantly, his body leaning forward into the run. He crossed the desert in a blur, his robes flowing with the rhythm of his speed. Dry wind tore across the open land, dragging spirals of sand around his legs while heat still rose from the earth in wavering currents. He passed over cracked ridges of stone and steep dunes without slowing, boots touching solid ground only briefly before launching forward again.

The farther he moved, the emptier the desert became, the silence swallowing everything except the rush of wind and the muted impacts of his steps. Above him, the sun grew hotter and hotter as the sun rose higher and higher, then when the sun could not rise anymore, the sky darkened slowly, stars beginning to emerge over the vast northern horizon, but Sagiri did not stop.

You'd better stay alive until I come and beat some sense into you!