

KEEPER 371

Chapter 371: TIPPING OVER

For two weeks, the Endless Pool remained perfectly still. Not a ripple disturbed its black surface, not a single sign betrayed what lay beneath its impossible depths.

The cavern beneath Galka War Academy had become a place of unbearable silence.

N'varu spent most of his days seated cross-legged before the water with his eyes closed, saying little.

They had all tried to go into the pool, but it rejected them and spat them out almost immediately.

Salka hid his concern behind his usual calm, though the tightening of his jaw each passing day betrayed him.

Lotaga had nearly worn a path into the stone from pacing, muttering every remedy he knew beneath his breath despite knowing none of them could reach the man beneath the water.

Only Zaira never moved.

The colossal beast refused food, refused rest, and never once left the edge of the Endless Pool.

She lay with her enormous head lowered toward the black water, releasing the occasional low whimper that echoed mournfully through the cavern, as though she could still feel her master's presence somewhere beneath the endless depths.

Then, on the morning of the fifteenth day, the water moved.

It did not ripple outward as ordinary water would. Instead, the surface folded inward upon itself, drawing into a single perfect circle that slowly widened across the pool without creating so much as a splash.

N'varu's eyes snapped open instantly.

"He is back," he said quietly, though the certainty in his voice left no room for hesitation. Everyone retreated several paces while even Zaira's head lifted from the edge of the pool, every muscle in her enormous body tensing.

The circles suddenly stopped.

For one impossible heartbeat, the cavern became completely silent. Then darkness erupted from the center of the pool. It shot upward like a pillar that swallowed every trace of light around it.

It was as though the darkness had devoured light itself. An unbearable pressure descended upon the cavern. Stone groaned and dust rained from the ceiling. Lotaga was forced to one knee while several Sandshades instinctively reached for weapons they immediately realized would be useless.

Even Salka found himself struggling to remain standing. Only Zaira endured the pressure without lowering her head, though her ears flattened as she stared into the heart of the darkness. Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the pillar began collapsing into itself. Layer after layer folded inward until the impossible darkness shrank into a single point suspended above the water before vanishing completely.

Sagiri stood where it had disappeared, suspended upon the black surface of the Endless Pool as though the water itself had become solid beneath him.

His appearance had changed in subtle but unmistakable ways. The crimson that had consumed his hair was gone, leaving it almost entirely black save for a single crimson strand resting against his forehead.

The markings that had once spread wildly across his body now lay dormant beneath his skin like faded ink, no longer writhing with restless power. Yet it was his eyes that held everyone captive.

They no longer burned with grief or vengeance. They looked impossibly ancient, carrying a stillness that made him seem far older than any man standing in the cavern. He slowly opened his hand, watching a thread of darkness drift from his palm before dissolving harmlessly into the air.

"Interesting..." he murmured, his voice quieter than any of them remembered. Before anyone could speak, Zaira surged forward, stopping only when her enormous head rested gently against his chest. The beast released a trembling whimper so full of relief that even Salka looked away. Sagiri smiled faintly and rested his hand against her scales.

"I know, beauty," he whispered. "I'm home." But somewhere deep within him, beyond even his own thoughts, countless distant voices stirred before fading once more into silence.

Sagiri looked from one familiar face to another, lingering on the exhaustion etched into each of them before the faintest smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"You all seem restless," he said calmly. "I have only been away a few hours."

The words were met with stunned silence. Lotaga blinked twice. Matasi stared at him as though he had misheard. Even N'varu slowly opened his eyes. Then Salka let out a dry laugh and shook his head.

"Hours?" he repeated. "Sagiri... you've been lying in that pool for two weeks." The smile disappeared from Sagiri's face.

"Two... weeks?" he echoed quietly.

"Two weeks," Salka confirmed. "While you were asleep in your little world, the rest of us have been trying to stop the continent from setting itself on fire."

Matasi folded his arms with an irritated snort.

"Things have gone to shit," he muttered.

"War is upon us." Koru, who had remained silent until then, stepped forward, unable to hide the frustration in his voice. "I should be on the front lines preparing the South," he said. "Instead, I've been sitting in this cave for days... babysitting you."

There was no real anger in his words, only the strain of a man being pulled away from his duty. Sagiri lowered his gaze for a long moment, absorbing everything without a flicker of panic. The Archive stirred quietly within him, almost urging him to ask more, but he silenced it. When he finally looked up again, his expression remained impossibly calm.

"Then the plan moved more quickly than I expected," he said. He climbed fully from the edge of the Endless Pool, water sliding from his clothes before vanishing as though the darkness itself absorbed every drop.

The chill of the northern cavern suddenly settled upon him, and he glanced down at his soaked garments.

"I will need warm clothes," he said matter-of-factly before looking back at the gathered warriors.

"Then... fill me in." His crimson eyes swept over every face.

"It cannot possibly get any worse in the next hour or two," Sagiri said, gliding to the centre of the room.

Sagiri slowly climbed the last stone steps leading out of the cavern, Zaira squiizing his enmous body faithfully behind him while the others followed in silence. The familiar corridors of Galka War Academy greeted him with their weathered stone walls and narrow archways, worn smooth by generations of warriors who had passed through them.

He reached out absentmindedly, letting his fingertips brush against the cold rock as he walked. The moment his skin touched the ancient stone, countless faint echoes stirred at the edge of his consciousness. The laughter from young cadets racing through the halls, the clash of swords, stern instructors barking corrections, victories celebrated, defeats endured, friendships forged over decades.

The Archive offered them to him instinctively before he gently pushed them back. Not now. For the first time since inheriting the relic, he found that he could choose how deeply he listened. The whispers faded into a distant murmur, allowing him to appreciate the academy for what it was rather than what it remembered. It felt... peaceful.

They eventually entered one of the academy's private chambers, where fresh clothes and food had already been prepared. Sagiri quickly changed into heavier northern garments, fastening the dark cloak across his shoulders before finally sitting at the long wooden table. Zaira had disappeared into the woods surrounding Salka on Sagiri's order. Sagiri broke the silence first.

"Start from the beginning."

Salka nodded once.

"Before that," he said, "there's something you should know. Senraki came."

Sagiri looked up.

"He arrived three days after we threw you into the pool," Salka continued. "Then disappeared again."

"Where?"

Salka shrugged.

"He wouldn't say. Just that there was something he needed to do."

"He said he'd return today," N'varu added quietly. "Or tomorrow at the latest. He seemed... troubled."

Sagiri frowned slightly but said nothing. If Senraki had left unfinished business to seek him out, then whatever it was could wait a few more hours.

Salka leaned forward, folding his hands together.

"Now for everything else."

His expression hardened.

"The morning after you disappeared beneath the pool, word reached the North that the entire southern border garrison had been wiped out."

Matasi snorted.

"You certainly know how to make an entrance."

"No one knows you left afterward," Salka continued. "As far as the North is concerned, the Supreme Chief of the South declared war."

"And the South?" Sagiri asked.

N'varu answered this time.

"The South believes exactly what we feared." His voice carried obvious fatigue. "You vanished inside enemy territory. No one has heard from you in two weeks. Zifara assumes you've either been captured... or you're marching deeper into the North alone."

A faint smile almost appeared on Sagiri's face.

"He would assume the second."

"He did," N'varu admitted. "For about three days."

The smile vanished.

"And now?"

"Now," N'varu said gravely, "both continents are mobilizing. The border has become one enormous battlefield waiting for someone foolish enough to strike first. Zifara has called every southern banner. The northern tribes have answered the Supreme Mandra's summons. Supply lines are moving. Fortresses are reinforcing. Scouts are disappearing every night."

Salka exhaled slowly.

"We're no longer trying to prevent a war, Sagiri."

He held Sagiri's gaze.

"We're trying to stop the first battle... because once that happens, no one will be able to stop the rest."

Chapter 372. SANDSHADE DECOY

Sagiri remained silent for several moments, his fingers lightly tapping the wooden table as he pieced together everything he had been told.

Nothing about the situation felt natural.

'Why could the supreme madra give into this ploy? Had the beast art he was practicing finally turned on him?' Sagiri thought.

The situation was moving far too quickly, almost as though someone had been waiting for the slightest excuse to ignite the continent. Finally, he looked up.

"Why?" he asked quietly. "Why would the Supreme Mandra move so recklessly?" His crimson eyes settled on Salka.

'Surely Tsaka did not go back on him turning a blind eye? Did the madra turn a deaf ear to him?' Sagiri thought.

"Tsaka should have stopped this before it reached this point." He said out loud.

No one answered immediately.

Sagiri leaned back slightly, thinking aloud more than questioning them.

"Either Tsaka betrayed me..." He paused before shaking his head. "No. That old fox is many things, but foolish is not one of them." His gaze drifted toward the window overlooking the academy grounds.

"Then he failed." The words came out heavier than he intended. "Or perhaps even he can no longer keep the Supreme Mandra in check." The realization settled over the room like a shadow.

Sagiri had anticipated retaliation for destroying the southern garrison, but not on this scale and certainly not this quickly. Someone had accelerated events while he lay unconscious beneath the Endless Pool.

"Things have moved far faster than I expected," he murmured. "Much faster."

Matasi nodded grimly.

"Every northern fortress is preparing for conflict. Every southern city is doing the same. There is no one left trying to slow things down." Matasi folded his arms.

"Even Galka war academy and all academies aren't untouched." Sagiri looked toward him.

"The academy has begun preparing its cadets by order of the ten schools," Matasi explained. "Not for the front lines. Not yet. They're being organized into relief divisions, village protection units, supply escorts... anything that frees experienced warriors to march to the border. If war begins, every hand will be needed." Through the open doorway, Sagiri could hear it in the distance in the four pentagons now that his mind had quieted.

Boots striking stone in perfect rhythm. Commands echoing across the training grounds. The clash of wooden practice weapons. It was louder than he remembered. More urgent. Less like training and more like preparation.

He closed his eyes briefly. Even the ten schools, an organization that had always stood above petty politics, had begun bracing itself for what was coming. That alone told him how serious the situation had become. He rose slowly from his chair, fastening his cloak around his shoulders.

"Then I cannot stay here." Every eye in the room turned toward him. "The moment word spreads that I have awakened inside Galka War Academy, this place becomes a target." His voice remained calm, almost detached, but the conviction behind it was unmistakable. "

I owe this academy too much to drag it into my war." He looked toward N'varu, then Salka. "If the North discovers I am here, they'll believe Galka academy has chosen the South and harbours an enemy. If the South learns I'm here, they'll come seeking me in numbers." His jaw tightened ever so slightly.

"Either way, this mountain becomes a battlefield." He shook his head once.

"I won't allow that." A heavy silence settled over the room before Sagiri spoke again, quieter this time.

Sagiri stood in silence for a moment, his eyes moving across everyone gathered in the chamber before settling on N'varu.

"You leave first," he said. "Take Zaira and the other Sandshades. Head west." N'varu frowned slightly but remained silent, allowing Sagiri to continue.

"I can't keep running. I am your sandshade this can't continue hiding!" Nvaru snapped.

"You want us to hide your beast when it should protect you?" Agia one of the sandshades said.

"Don't hide her." Sagiri glanced toward the enormous beast resting quietly behind him. "Quite the opposite. Make her impossible to ignore." Several brows furrowed around the room. "I want every scout, every spy, and every messenger between the North and South to believe I am riding openly

toward the western tribes. The Tsanka Kun hates me enough to dare go after the beast even with no chance of winning." A faint smile touched his lips.

"Let them panic. Let them chase shadows."

N'varu finally nodded in understanding.

"You want the attention on us."

"Exactly," Sagiri replied. "If they're watching Zaira, they won't be watching me." His gaze shifted to Salka.

"I'll leave separately after nightfall. We rendezvous at the western convergence point once the pursuit has shifted." Salka crossed his arms.

"And if they don't take the bait?"

"They will," Sagiri answered with quiet certainty. "No one who has seen Zaira mistakes her for another beast. They'll assume I'm on her back whether I am or not." His attention returned to Salka.

"As for you... you stay." Salka raised an eyebrow. "Senraki isn't here," Sagiri continued. "Until he returns, Galka needs someone capable of protecting it." He looked toward the academy walls beyond the window. "The academy cannot afford to appear leaderless now." Salka clicked his tongue.

"So you get to run around while I guard children? I should leave them to Lotaga."

"And there will be no academy to come back to after the unrest." Yavaga snapped back

"Fine. I was planning to do that anyway" He sighed. "I'll remain until the man child returns. You will not wait for him any longer?"

"No," Sagiri said, shaking his head. "I wait until nightfall. If Senraki has not returned by then, I leave regardless."

Salka frowned.

"You're expecting trouble."

"I'm expecting delays," Sagiri replied. "Senraki never misses appointments without reason." His expression hardened slightly. "If he doesn't return by tonight, something has prevented him from doing so." The room fell quiet. Everyone present understood what that implied. Sagiri stepped toward the doorway before pausing once more.

"Protect the academy if you must," he said without turning around. "This fortress can hold back a full blown battle for a month or two. "

"I know that. Worry about yourself." Salka said playing with a dagger like it was some paly thing. He was not even looking at the weapon...

The door however suddely sprang open and a frustered warrior walked in...

"You better have a good reson for acting like that or you will be on pet tending duty...." Salka did not even lift his face to say that as the warrior came to a halt in the middle of the room.

"We have a situation captain..." He said his eyes wide.

Chapter 373. BONE TO CHEW

The warrior swallowed hard before forcing the words out.

"Captain... the Chief of the Northern Tribes has surrounded Galka War Academy." The room fell silent. "His warriors are still arriving. They're closing in from every direction. East. West. South. Even the

northern ridge has been occupied. They haven't attacked..." He hesitated. "...but they're tightening the circle."

Surprisingly, neither Salka nor Sagiri reacted. It was Matasi who looked between them in confusion. Salka merely sighed, twirling the dagger between his fingers without once looking at it.

"He's faster than I estimated," he muttered. "I expected him by dawn tomorrow." Sagiri nodded once.

"So did I." The two men exchanged a brief glance before Salka looked back at the messenger.

"Go back."

The warrior blinked.

"Sir?"

"You heard me," Salka replied calmly. "Tell everyone to continue exactly what they were doing before you barged in here. Training continues. Classes continue. Patrols continue. Nobody panics."

"B-but Captain..."

"The academy has not been attacked," Salka interrupted. "Not yet."

The warrior opened his mouth again before closing it. Salka finally lifted his eyes from the dagger. There was no fear in them, only cold calculation.

"Even the Chief of the Northern Tribes does not possess the authority to violate the neutrality of the Ten Schools. Galka War Academy is protected by the ten schools. If he marches through those gates without cause, he declares himself an enemy not only of Galka, but of every academy in Tagayia." The warrior's breathing steadied slightly.

"Then... we're safe?" Salka's expression remained unreadable.

"For now." His voice became quieter. "That protection won't last forever." The room grew heavy again. Everyone present understood what he meant.

Those ancient laws existed because powerful people chose to respect them. Once enough desperation entered a war, laws became little more than words carved into stone. Sagiri folded his arms.

"Senraki's absence complicates everything."

"More than complicates it," Salka replied. "If the headmaster were standing here, no northern chief would dare linger outside these walls for long. But with Senraki gone..." He glanced toward the window overlooking the academy grounds. "...every hour he remains absent weakens our position."

Yavaga clicked his tongue. "The old fool chooses now of all times to disappear." N'varu quietly shook his head.

"No. If Senraki is missing, then he didn't choose anything. Something important has delayed him." Sagiri said nothing.

His crimson eyes drifted toward the distant academy gates as though he could already see the thousands of northern warriors gathering beyond them.

The pieces were falling into place far too neatly.

Someone was forcing every player onto the board before they were ready. He could feel it. This siege was not meant to conquer Galka. It was meant to keep him exactly where he was or just drive the northern tribes into battle. They loved battle most after all...

'Senraki missing and Zaka Askana showing up is a bit too coincidental' Sagiri thought...

Contrary to everyone's expectations, Sagiri slowly rose from his chair.

There was no urgency in the movement, anger or murderous aura spilling from him as there once would have been.

He simply stood, adjusted the sleeves of his cloak, and walked toward the window overlooking the academy grounds. Sagiri watched the distant horizon for several long moments before speaking.

"Perhaps..." he said quietly, "...it is time I teach the Grand Chief of the North what it feels like to be weak." The words struck the room hard.

Salka's head snapped toward him so quickly the dagger in his hand stopped spinning. Even Matasi and the Sandshades stared. This was not the Sagiri they had expected to awaken.

The man who had entered the Endless Pool had been drowning in rage, barely restraining himself from marching north alone. The man standing before them now was... calm. Dangerously calm. His anger had not disappeared. It no longer erupted without thought.

That frightened Salka far more than the reckless fury Sagiri had carried before. Sagiri's gaze never left the distant walls.

"I have unfinished business with Zorath Zaka Asakana." His voice remained level. "Long before this war began." Images surfaced unbidden in his mind the training grounds of the Galka war headquarters, Kaka struggling to stand beneath bruises that no child should have carried, the silent resignation in the boy's eyes, and the weight of a father's cruelty disguised as strength.

Back then, Sagiri had simply walked away.

He had neither the authority nor the reason to interfere. Now he possessed both. A corner of his mouth twitched into the faintest smile.

"I wondered what became of my Kaka and Zaka after I left the North," he murmured. "Whether he still serves beneath that man... or whether he finally grown tired of carrying his pride." N'varu frowned.

Being the same age as Sagiri, he knew exactly how much that squad had once meant to him. He himself had witnessed the cruelty of grand chief Zaka Asakana. He had almost killed his son in the name of training

"What do you mean?" he asked. Sagiri finally turned from the window.

"Nothing changes." His answer was immediate. "The plan continues exactly as I outlined it." He looked around the room until every eye met his.

"We wait for Senraki until sundown. If he does not..." His gaze shifted toward the sandshades, who were scattered quietly around the room. "...then you leave with Zaira exactly as planned." He rested one hand on Nokai's hilt.

"As for me..." His crimson eyes sharpened ever so slightly. "I have a bone to chew with Grand Zorath Zaka Asakana." The room fell silent again. Then Sagiri allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

"Well..." he said almost thoughtfully, "that is... if the impatient chief can restrain himself until nightfall before deciding to assert his dominance."

"You want to kill the chief?" Lotaga Yavaga asked...

"Well if he dies then he is weak. The weak die in the north especially in the Bami tribe isn't that it?" There was sharp edge in Sagiri's voice.

"Leave the chief to me. In case you have forgotten I am an Asakana and a Bami. We will settle this our way." Salka said.

"I have not said I will kill the chief captain. I only wish to talk." Sagiri said in an ice cold tone and Salka just shook his head but he did not dare argue.

Chapter 374. ZAKA ASAKANA VS SAGIRI I

The hour passed far too quickly. Every few minutes, another scout returned with the same report. No sign of Senraki. No message. No trace.

By the time the sun had begun sinking toward the western mountains, even Salka had accepted that the old headmaster would not return before nightfall. Without another word, he left the academy and made his way to the outer nonagon, where thousands of northern warriors had completely encircled the fortress-like school.

Banners bearing the crest of the Galka insignia fluttered in the evening wind while armored warriors stood shoulder to shoulder in disciplined ranks. At their center sat Great Chief of the north Zaka Asakana upon an enormous warhorse, his broad frame radiating the confidence of a man who had never been denied anything by force.

Salka stopped on top of the outer gate of Galka war academy, his expression unreadable.

"State your business," he called. Zaka's eyes narrowed.

"Hand over the Southerner." His voice rolled across the courtyard like distant thunder. "The Supreme Chief of the South is hiding within these walls." Salka didn't even blink.

"The intel you have is not the one I have." Salka said his voice calm.

"His beast ehaded this way. My scouts saw it even in the night it is hard to miss such a beast." Zaka Asakana said.

"Whether he is or isn't is none of your concern." His tone remained almost bored. "You know the laws as well as I do. No chief, king, or mandra possesses the authority to enter an academy by force."

Zaka's lips curled into a humorless smile.

"Those laws exist because men choose to respect them."

"Exactly," Salka replied. "Which is why I'd advise you to continue respecting them." A murmur rippled through the gathered warriors. Zorath slowly dismounted, the ground seeming to groan beneath his weight as he landed. He stepped forward until only a few paces separated the two men.

"I will give your headmaster one hour to present himself," he declared. "If Senraki does not appear..." His gaze hardened. "...I will enter." Salka folded his arms.

"You don't have the mandate."

"I am the grand zorath of the north. Every inch of this territory belongs to me"

"And I am the marshal of the academy. I have as much right as the grand marshal and same power inside the academy as you have in the north."

"Don't mistake neutrality for protection." Zaka snarled

Salka smirked in response.

"Don't tell me you have the right to kill cadets because you think we harbour and nemy withing the walls. Your army is rather uncalled for dont you think great chief of the north."

"I see you are the catain Salka... You served under me once before the supreme mandra scooped you only to spit you. Do you peraps think you are worthy of being great chief of the north so much so you wish to challenge me?!" Zaka snarled again.

"It is you who is feeling a challenge I merely wish to protect the young warriors and future of Tagayia." Salka said. Both men are beast to the eye chief Zaka more so and many had speculated that captain salka would b the one to be the next chief of the north.

Well he was unbeatable among hisnpeers in combat and weaponly and even the men under him would topple a small nation f left to their own devices. The whispers seemed to have reached the ears of the great chief of the north

The air between them became suffocating.

Neither man yielded an inch. It had become less a negotiation and more two predators measuring the other's resolve.

Then something changed. Zaka's patience vanished.

"Enough." He didn't even wait for the promised hour to expire. He raised one hand.

"Advance."

Hundreds of armored boots struck the earth at once. The first ranks surged toward the academy gates. Salka's eyes narrowed dangerously.

His hand moved toward his weapon.

Warriors atop the walls immediately lowered bows while instructors and senior instructors flooded onto the battlements.

Before the great chief's men could make contact however then the sky exploded.

A deafening boom ripped across the battlefield as something descended from above faster than the eye could follow. Before anyone could react, a figure slammed into the ground directly between the two opposing forces.

The impact was cataclysmic.

Stone shattered in every direction as a shockwave erupted outward with enough force to tear banners from their poles and send entire ranks of warriors flying backward. Horses screamed as they lost their footing.

Northern soldiers crashed into one another like scattered leaves before a storm.

Even Salka, who had been expecting something, was thrown backward. He instinctively planted one knee against the ground, sliding dozens of meters through shattered stone before finally grinding to a halt in a cloud of dust. Across from him, Zaka's enormous horse's frame was forced three heavy steps backward, his boots carving trenches into the earth before he managed to stop himself. Silence followed.

Dust rolled across the battlefield for a long moment before it began to settle.

Then, slowly, a black cloak emerged from the settling cloud. Sagiri stood at the center of the crater, Nokai resting loosely across one shoulder, his expression impossibly calm. Without looking at either army, he brushed a speck of dust from his sleeve and sighed.

"I thought," he said quietly, "we agreed to wait until sundown."

The dust had barely settled when Grand Chief Zorath Zaka Asakana let out a slow breath through his nose, his piercing gaze fixed upon the young man standing in the crater. His lips curled into a sneer.

"You've always had a flair for dramatic entrances," he rumbled. "I preferred you when you knew your place." Sagiri met his eyes without the slightest trace of emotion.

"And I prefer you outside academy grounds." His voice was calm enough to be mistaken for indifference.

"Tell me, Great Chief..." His crimson eyes drifted lazily toward the shattered formation of northern warriors before returning to the towering man. "...how quickly were you hoping to die by forcing your way into an academy?" A ripple of outrage spread through the northern ranks.

Zaka laughed a deep, mocking laugh that echoed across the courtyard.

"Die?" he repeated. "Boy, you have no right to ask me such a question." His smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "I'm here to kill you." The declaration hung in the air like a drawn blade. Sagiri merely tilted his head slightly.

"Are you?" Sagiri asked. "I wasn't aware you were capable." The words landed hard.

Zaka's jaw clenched so violently that the muscles in his neck bulged. Veins surfaced beneath the skin of his massive forearms as rage flooded his features.

"Careful," he growled. "Your tongue has always outrun your strength."

Sagiri shrugged.

"Then perhaps today you'll finally catch it." A dangerous silence followed. The warriors on both sides instinctively stepped back. They could feel the killing intent pouring from the two men. Zorath slowly reached for the massive axe strapped across his back before stopping himself. Instead, he stepped down from his warhorse with a heavy thud that cracked the stone beneath his boots. The beast snorted nervously and retreated on its own, sensing the mood of its master.

Zaka rolled his broad shoulders once before planting his feet firmly apart. His enormous frame seemed even larger now, his presence alone pressing against the air. Then two low growls echoed from behind him.

Shadows detached themselves from the northern ranks.

Two colossal cats padded silently to either side of their master, their fur black as a moonless night, their golden eyes fixed unblinkingly upon Sagiri. Their shoulders rose almost to Zaka's chest, muscles rippling beneath sleek coats as they bared fangs longer than daggers.

The ground itself seemed to tremble as they settled into crouches beside him. Zorath rested one hand on the head of the larger beast without taking his eyes off Sagiri.

"You asked whether I was capable," he said, his voice dropping into a dangerous whisper. "Come closer..." His grip tightened. "...and I'll show you why every chief from the northern tribes bows when I speak." Sagiri looked from one beast to the other before returning his gaze to Zaka Asakana.

Then, to everyone's disbelief, he smiled. It wasn't mocking. It wasn't arrogant. It was the quiet smile of a man who had finally found exactly what he had been looking for.

"Good," he said softly. "I was beginning to think I'd have to lower my expectatown."

"I will show you why the entire south bows to me. You are a mere bug Zaka Asakana Bami. And I despise you themost." Sagiri articulated each word but he did not make a move to leave his spot.

The suddenly he dissapeared from his place.

Chapter 375. ZAKA ASAKAN VS SAGIRI II

The battlefield fell deathly silent as Sagiri vanished from the crater without warning.

One heartbeat he stood with Nokai resting upon his shoulder, and the next there was nothing but empty air. Gasps erupted from both armies. Even Salka's eyes narrowed, while he instinctively reached for his weapon, unable to follow the movement.

Zaka Asakana did not look phased. His eyes remained ahead of him and his cats skulked even lower. Then suddenly as if dodging the air Grand chief Zaka Asakana twisted his enormous body just as a fist appeared seemingly from nowhere.

Their punches collided with a deafening explosion that shook the entire Outer Nonagon. The impact sent a violent shockwave racing through the ancient forest, flattening bushes, ripping branches from centuries-old trees and throwing dust high into the evening sky.

The impact was so deafeneing and strong Zaka Asakana bent his knee and slip back an inch. He was truly a beast. The strenth could have flattened a lesser man.

The earth beneath them shattered into a massive crater, yet neither man gave an inch. Zaka's grin slowly spread across his rugged face as he realized he had blocked the attack.

"There you are," he rumbled the defiant smile on his face not leaving.

Sagiri did not answer. Instead, he disappeared again. A heartbeat later another explosion echoed through the forest as Zaka spun on instinct, meeting another strike that would have shattered an ordinary warrior into pieces. The Grand Chief laughed, the sound rolling like thunder through the trees.

"Again! Same tricks will not work on me. Don't tell me this is all you got. Even the air betrays your little tricks" he roared before launching himself forward in an attempt to attack Sagiri but Sagiri evaded him each time

The ground exploded beneath every step of his charge.

Despite his monstrous size, he moved with terrifying speed, each punch carrying enough force to demolish stone. Truly the cream of the top of the Asakana clan.

"Don't tell me that all the glory of the dear beast of the south belongs to his beast. Don't disappoint me. I have been wanting to see what man is worth becoming a supreme ruler at nineteen..."

Sagiri remained impossibly calm. He slipped beneath the first blow by the width of a finger.

The punch missed him again completely and struck an ancient tree instead, vaporizing the enormous trunk into a storm of splintered wood. Before the debris even reached the ground, another fist came. Sagiri pivoted smoothly, his crimson cloak dancing around the attack as another towering tree was obliterated behind him.

Blow after blow followed. Every missed strike carved another crater into the sacred training grounds or reduced another ancient giant to shattered timber, while Sagiri flowed between them with effortless precision, never wasting a single movement. He did not attack. He did not draw upon the Archive. He did not even lift Nokai.

He merely avoided every devastating strike by inches, redirecting the Grand Chief's overwhelming strength against the battlefield itself. Warriors from both sides watched in stunned silence as the legendary forest was slowly transformed into a wasteland by Zaka's own fists as frustration slowly crept across the Grand Chief's face.

"Fight me!" he bellowed, hurling another punch that Sagiri quietly guided past his shoulder with nothing more than the palm of his hand. The redirected force sent Zaka stumbling a single step, the first sign of imbalance since the duel began. Sagiri answered at last, his voice carrying clearly through the ruined forest despite its softness.

"I am." Sagiri answered,

Zaka's eyes burned with fury.

"No," he snarled. "You're dancing." Sagiri's expression never changed.

"No," he corrected calmly. "A fight is meant to be enjoyed dear chief and after you waiting for me all this months wouldn't be too shameful to end it quickly." The words struck harder just as Sagiri had expected.

Rage exploded across the Grand Chief's face as he unleashed an even more ferocious barrage, his massive frame becoming a blur of destruction, yet the more violently he fought, the calmer Sagiri seemed to become.

Finally, after another thunderous exchange that split the earth between them, Sagiri stepped back and looked quietly across the devastation surrounding them. Hundreds of shattered trees lay scattered across the Outer Nonagon. The once-pristine forest had become a landscape of broken trunks and smoking craters. He slowly turned his crimson eyes back toward Zaka.

"Do you see it?" he asked. The Grand Chief frowned. "See what?" Sagiri gestured calmly at the destruction around them.

"You've been fighting me for several minutes." He paused, letting the silence settle over the battlefield. "And yet..." His gaze locked onto Zaka's. "...I haven't attacked you once. You are just like a beast tearing everything in your wake. How dissapointing."

The realization struck Zaka hard and for the briefest of moments, the Grand Chief stood frozen, his chest rising and falling as his gaze swept across the ruined forest. Everywhere he looked were the scars of his own strength.

Splintered trunks, craters gouged into the earth, clouds of dust still hanging between the trees. Not a single one had been caused by Sagiri. The silence lasted only a heartbeat before Zaka's face twisted into pure rage.

"Enough!" he roared, the sound shaking loose leaves from the battered canopy. His aura erupted around him like a storm. The ground beneath his feet collapsed as he lunged once more, this time abandoning all semblance of technique.

He became a living avalanche.

Every step crushed stone into powder. Every swing split the air with a shriek loud enough to make nearby warriors cover their ears. Sagiri disappeared again, reappearing atop the trunk of a fallen tree just as Zaka's fist obliterated the ground where he had stood. Before the dust settled, the Grand Chief was already there, refusing to let him breathe.

A knee shot upward aiming for sagiri who was still midair where he had been most of the fight. Sagiri twisted sideways in midair, the attack grazing his cloak before another punch came from below.

He landed lightly upon the giant forearm itself, sprinted along it with impossible balance, and vaulted over Zaka's shoulder.

The watching armies could scarcely believe their eyes. It looked less like a duel and more like a man trying to catch smoke. Snarling, Zaka spun with frightening speed and seized the trunk of a nearby ancient tree. With a grunt, he ripped the massive tree from the earth, roots and all, before swinging it like an enormous club. T

The forest groaned beneath the impossible display of strength. Sagiri crossed Nokai before him for the first time. The black blade caught the trunk with a sharp metallic crack, yet instead of cutting through it, he redirected its momentum upward.

The colossal tree sailed into the sky, disappearing above the canopy before crashing back to earth hundreds of metres away with an impact that echoed through the entire Outer Nonagon. Even so, Sagiri refused to counterattack. His restraint only fueled Zaka's fury further.

Veins bulged across the Grand Chief's neck as he bared his teeth.

"Stop looking down on me!" he thundered. "Fight me like a warrior!" Sagiri's crimson eyes remained steady, almost sorrowful.

"The moment I do," he answered quietly, tightening his grip on Nokai, "this fight will end. Besides I don't see a warrior before me. I see a rampaging beast."

Chapter 376. ZAKA ASAKAN VS SAGIRI III

The words struck Zaka hard, and his lips twitched in anger.

For a heartbeat, the Grand Chief simply stared, his enormous chest rising and falling as fury wrestled with reason. Then reason lost. A roar tore from his throat, so violent that the trees themselves seemed to recoil.

"A man rather die than fight a dishonourable fight!" he bellowed.

The sound had barely faded when two shadows burst from the northern ranks.

The great black cats that had remained patiently at their master's side exploded into motion, their massive forms gliding across the battlefield with terrifying speed.

Their paws barely seemed to touch the earth as they circled wide, instinctively cutting off every avenue of escape. Sagiri's crimson eyes shifted from one beast to the other before returning to Zaka.

"Finally," he murmured. "Now the real fight begins. I was wondering when you were gonna let your pets join the fight."

Zaka didn't answer.

He charged again, and the two beasts moved with him as though they shared a single mind.

One came low through the trees, silent as death, while the other leapt high into the canopy, disappearing among the branches.

At the same instant, Zaka's fist descended like a falling mountain. Sagiri sidestepped, but instead of retreating, the first cat was already there. Claws larger than swords ripped through the space where his ribs had been a heartbeat earlier, forcing him to twist backwards just as Zaka's elbow crashed through three ancient trees behind him.

Before Sagiri's feet could touch the ground, the second beast descended from above.

Its jaws snapped shut with a sound like two boulders colliding.

Sagiri vanished between its fangs by the width of a finger, reappearing several paces away, only to find Zaka already waiting.

The Grand Chief's knee drove into his guard with enough force to launch Sagiri across the forest. He crashed through one tree, then another, before flipping onto his feet and sliding across the earth, boots carving deep trenches before he finally stopped.

A murmur spread through both armies.

It was the first clean blow Zaka had landed.

Blood dripped from the corner of Sagiri's mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his hand and looked at the crimson stain for a moment before smiling faintly.

"Better," he admitted. Across the battlefield, Zaka rolled his shoulders, his breathing heavy but triumphant.

"You bleed after all." Zaka taunted

Sagiri lifted Nokai properly this time, the black blade humming softly as it caught the fading sunlight.

"I always did." Then he lowered into a stance unlike anything the watching warriors had ever seen. "I wanted to give you the honour of landing one punch as a gift for losing to me.

"He's finally taking this seriously," Lotaga muttered/

"No," Salka corrected quietly, unable to look away. "He's still holding back." Before another word could be spoken, the forest exploded into motion once again.

Zaka attacked from the front while both great cats struck from opposite sides, turning the sacred Outer Nonagon into a storm of claws, fists, shattered earth, and collapsing trees. Entire sections of woodland vanished beneath the relentless assault.

Ancient trunks toppled like blades of grass, and shockwaves rolled endlessly beneath the canopy. Yet at the center of that chaos, Sagiri moved with almost unnatural composure.

Nokai flashed only to deflect claws that would have torn mountains apart or redirect fists capable of pulverizing stone. He still refused to strike a killing blow.

Every opening he created... he abandoned. Every weakness he exposed... he ignored. It was as though he was waiting for something. Watching. Learning.

Zaka noticed it too, and with every passing exchange, his rage deepened. For the first time in decades, the strongest man in the North had begun to understand what true helplessness felt like.

The battle had long since left the clearing where it began. It tore through the Outer Nonagon like a living storm, carving a path of destruction through forests that had stood untouched for generations.

Ancient trees crashed one after another beneath Zaka Asakana's relentless assault, each impact echoing across the academy grounds like distant thunder. From the walls of the Inner Nonagon, instructors and cadets could only watch in stunned silence as the sacred woodland slowly disappeared beneath clouds of dust and splintered timber.

At the center of it all, Sagiri continued to retreat with calculated precision. Every step was measured. Every movement wasted nothing. Nokai danced through the air in flashes of black steel, not to wound, but to divert. One swipe redirected the claws of the first great cat into the trunk of an ancient oak, splitting it clean down the middle.

A twist of his wrist turned the second beast's pounce into empty air before Zaka's monstrous fist descended where Sagiri had stood only an instant earlier, blasting a crater deep enough to swallow a house.

"Stand still!" Zaka roared, spinning with frightening speed as he hurled another devastating strike.

Sagiri flowed around it like water around stone, his cloak fluttering through the violent winds created by the blow. The watching warriors slowly began to notice something that chilled them more than the destruction itself. Sagiri was no longer merely defending. He was... studying.

His crimson eyes followed every movement Zaka made.

It was the gaze of a hunter patiently learning the rhythm of dangerous prey. Zaka felt it too. Every time he committed to an attack, Sagiri was already gone. Every feint was read before it was completed. Every combination dissolved into empty air.

The Grand Chief's breathing grew heavier, not from exhaustion alone, but from mounting frustration.

"Fight me!" he thundered once more, his voice cracking through the ruined forest.

"Fight me like you fought the southern garrison! Fight me like you destroyed my warriors!" Sagiri finally stopped. The sudden stillness caught everyone by surprise. He stood atop the broken trunk of a fallen giant, Nokai resting loosely at his side as the evening wind stirred his crimson hair. For the first time since the duel began, he looked directly into Zaka's eyes.

"You truly don't understand." His voice was calm enough to silence the battlefield.

"Understand what?" Zaka growled. Sagiri's expression remained unreadable.

"If I fought you the way I fought them..." He glanced briefly at Nokai before returning his gaze to the Grand Chief. "...you would already be dead."

Rage exploded across Zaka's face.

"Liar!" he roared, launching himself upward with enough force to split the earth beneath him. Both great cats attacked simultaneously, one leaping from the shattered canopy while the other came low through the smoke and debris.

Three attacks.

Three different angles that left him no room to escape.

Even Salka instinctively took a step forward.

"Now..." he whispered. "...he'll have to strike." But Sagiri did something none of them expected. Instead of meeting the assault, he closed his eyes. For a single heartbeat, everything slowed. The roar of the beasts faded. The crashing trees disappeared. The battlefield itself seemed to fall away. Then his crimson eyes opened again. He moved once. A single step. The first cat's claws passed harmlessly through empty air. The second collided headfirst with Zaka's shoulder after losing sight of its target.

The Grand Chief staggered just enough for Sagiri to slip between them, brushing past all three attackers without delivering a single blow. He came to a stop several paces behind them, untouched.

Complete silence followed.

Even the beasts seemed confused.

Zaka slowly turned, his chest heaving as realization began creeping across his features. Sagiri had not escaped because he was faster. He had escaped because he had seen everything before it happened.

"You're toying with me" Zaka said at last, his voice lower now.

Sagiri gave a small nod. "You owe me a debt I have been willing to make you pay" He lifted Nokai onto his shoulder once more.

"You're strong, Grand Zorath." His eyes hardened. "But your anger makes you predictable and unfit to rule. A man who kills his own children is worse than an animal to me. Not even your cats there kill their cubs.

Zaka Askana paused for a moment as more silence stretched before his mouth fell open and he barked a laugh. The laugh grew and rose higher as it tore through the place.

Chapter 377. LAST LESSON

Zaka's laugh still tore through the broken trees when Sagiri stopped treating the duel like a study and started treating it like a debt coming due.

The two great cats circled him through ash and split cedar, waiting on the same impulse that lived in Zaka's shoulders before either beast committed its claws.

Sagiri kept Nokai low while the Archive pressed a faster answer against the walls he had built around it, hungry for the simple blood that would end every calculation.

He refused that answer, then watched Zaka mistake restraint for hesitation and drive forward with the left cat rising beside him like a second blade.

The second beast cut through the ruined canopy to close Sagiri's turn toward Galka Academy, yet its timing still depended on Zaka's attention reaching both animals before either one changed direction. 'Anger times them,' Sagiri thought, boots finding firm earth under ash, 'not skill. Just like their master'

He stepped into the charge instead of away from it, turning around Zaka's sword while Nokai brushed the weapon aside and left the waiting cat exposed for one clean heartbeat.

The beast corrected at once, forcing Zaka to twist his shoulder and keep its claws off his own back, which opened a gap between the animals wider than pride wanted to admit.

Sagiri stored the mistake with every earlier exchange from the duel while measuring how Zaka ranked the things he refused to lose.

Zaka protected his body first, his pride second, then the creatures carrying out his will.

"You are still fighting three ways at once," Sagiri said, voice flat while Nokai tracked the nearer cat, "that is why the forest keeps answering before you do."

Zaka's mouth twisted around another laugh that never fully formed.

"Then stop talking and die like the South should," he snarled, blade rising while northern warriors watched from the broken line behind Salka.

The Grand Zorath of the North swung again before Sagiri could exploit the opening.

Sagiri ducked under the cut and drove his heel into the ground as the first cat crossed behind him, changing the soil under its paws into a shallow break left by earlier impacts.

The beast's hind leg dropped into that break while Sagiri moved between the animal and Zaka, refusing to let them rebuild the triangle that had nearly crushed him in the last exchange.

Above him the second cat came through the canopy with claws already extended for his spine.

Sagiri trusted the pressure in the air, then turned Nokai across his back as it descended, letting the claws strike black metal before they slid toward the forest floor.

He guided the animal past his shoulder, then drove Nokai upward beneath its ribs with one clean motion that left no room for a second try.

The strike passed through fur and bone before the cat could twist free.

The great cat landed beside a broken cedar with dark blood spreading under its chest while loose branches shook around the weight that would not rise again.

Zaka stopped when he saw the body fold into the ash at the cedar roots.

He stared at his remaining companion as recognition moved through the living beast and replaced the impulse to attack with something closer to grief.

Sagiri held Nokai low, breath steady despite the burn under his torn cloth.

"You let it take the strike meant for you," he said, watching Zaka's hand tighten on the sword, "then spent this entire fight asking both creatures to protect the man who started it."

Zaka looked at the dead cat without answering while ash settled on the cooling blood.

The surviving beast pressed against his side until fur stuck to his armor, while Sagiri forced that soft reading out of his mind because sympathy would not keep the next claws from his throat.

'Companion, not tool,' Sagiri thought, Archive twitching with N'folu sand and old blood, 'killing it settles the fight without changing him.'

He forced the Archive's sand-memory down before it could turn the duel into a massacre the North would never forgive.

Zaka raised his blade and drew the surviving cat into his stance while northern ranks shifted behind broken trunks.

Salka's squad held the Galka line without crossing into a duel that still belonged to the Grand Zorath.

Sagiri could have ended the fight by opening the deeper part of himself the Archive kept offering like a clean ledger entry.

The Archive wanted that answer because it would make every consequence simple, every life into a recorded ending, every choice into ash that required no further accounting.

He refused the simple answer again while the living cat's breath scraped through the ruined trees.

He waited for Zaka to rush first and drag the last cat into motion before the gap between them could widen into something Zaka would call mercy.

Sagiri understood what the Grand Zorath was protecting beneath the anger.

Zaka had stopped watching the soldiers, his whole focus locked on the remaining cat's injured footing, the wound that had already changed its reach, plus the price of every mistake.

That choice gave Sagiri a usable measure of the man standing across the ash.

Zaka would abandon the battlefield before accepting that a creature under his command could be lost, which made the last cat both his shield and the leash controlling him.

"Send it away," Sagiri said, quiet while Nokai's edge caught ash light, "if you still know the difference between a companion and a sacrifice."

"The North does not send strength away," Zaka answered, breath hard while the cat snarled against his hip, "I do not take lessons from a southern ghost carrying dead memory."

The beast came low while Zaka attacked high, rebuilding their formation around one purpose.

Sagiri retreated across the broken ground and offered them a path that looked open toward the burned trees.

They followed because both remained near the target they intended to destroy, coordination improving with every step as grief sharpened into shared hunger.

Sagiri let them believe he had accepted the trap, then moved toward two burned trunks and drove Nokai into the soil as the cat crossed above him.

The blade caught a buried root and pulled it free as the beast landed badly on the torn earth.

Zaka reached for the animal and sacrificed the angle that would have cut Sagiri's shoulder, proving the leash still held even after blood had already taught him the cost.

Sagiri rose beneath the blade and struck its flat with Nokai, collapsing the three positions as Zaka tried to save the creature he had just used as a shield.

He backed away rather than taking the opening through Zaka's chest.

Killing the Grand Zorath before separating him from the last cat would repeat the same mistake that had brought the first animal down.

Sagiri refused to become that kind of teacher while both armies watched through the broken trunks.

Zaka caught the cat by the neck and dragged it clear, leaving himself exposed to Sagiri.

Every northern eye still watching from the trees saw the Grand Zorath choose the beast over his own guard.

The surviving cat answered with a ragged snarl, injured leg dragging through ash while its breath rasped from the earlier wound it had taken crossing Sagiri's path.

Zaka followed into the next charge with no formation left except grief and pride.

Sagiri turned his shoulders toward the paw, then placed himself between claw and northern blade, feeling Zaka's weapon pass above his head until the wake stirred his hair.

Nokai cut across the cat's front leg and destroyed the timing of the next attack without finishing the kill, because ending the bond would teach Zaka nothing worth keeping.

When the beast stumbled, Zaka reached for it again with both hands leaving his center open.

Sagiri drove his shoulder into the man's chest and sent him backward through a fallen trunk across exposed roots, ash exploding under the impact while the Archive screamed for a deeper cut.

The surviving cat recovered and sprang toward Sagiri's back before Zaka could finish rising.

Zaka's warning arrived after the attack began, leaving Sagiri to turn beneath the claws with Nokai raised and his injured ribs taking the shock when impact drove him into the ground.

The Archive crowded the walls he had built around it and demanded the power to end everything before another breath could be spent on restraint.

Sagiri remembered Rusha's hands, Bakuru's worn spear, N'varu's patient explanations, Kiuga's laughter, Kaka's scowl, then the people waiting behind Salka's line.

He used those names like weights on a scale until he remained himself under the Archive's pressure.

'Not yet,' he thought, tasting copper and ash, 'one death already paid the first lesson.'

He moved with the pressure instead of against it, rolling beneath the cat before cutting a shallow line that forced the beast aside without opening its life the way the first had ended.

The cat hit earth hard and stayed down long enough for Zaka to see the choice Sagiri had refused to finish.

Then Zaka's control broke the way pride breaks when grief finally outruns command.

The surviving beast rose into his rage while the laugh from the last Chapter changed its shape into a charge that needed no further order.

Zaka charged with the last cat across the ash, northern voices rising behind them.

Salka held his squad from rushing a duel that still belonged to the Grand Zorath and the Keeper.

Sagiri rose to meet them with Nokai turning toward the open ground, Archive sealed, first irreversible blow already cooling on the cedar roots behind him.

The study was over while the North still waited for a kneel that had not yet been earned.

What came next would decide whether the North bowed to strength or to the man still willing to teach it the cost of anger.

Chapter 378: THE STRONGEST KNEEL

Zaka attacked with more discipline after the first cat fell, keeping his body between Sagiri and the wounded beast while every exchange carried the animal toward safer ground.

Grief had not made the Grand Chief careless, since it had stripped away the political performance and left a warrior who understood exactly what the remaining companion meant to him.

The surviving cat limped once before correcting its gait, its eyes fixed on Sagiri while the smallest shift in Zaka's weight guided the creature toward the next charge.

Zaka cut low toward the ribs Sagiri had already injured, forcing Sagiri to jump over the blade before the cat's shoulder struck his side and sent him across the ash.

He rolled before Zaka's follow-up could pin him beneath the weapon, then raised Nokai as the Grand Chief stepped in and the cat circled behind him.

Their timing was no longer driven by anger, since Zaka had learned from the earlier failures and now protected the weakness the wounded beast could no longer hide.

The adjustment made each exchange more expensive for Sagiri, because Zaka no longer offered a predictable command or allowed the cat to drift outside his reach. The Grand Chief was using his injury as a boundary, forcing Sagiri to choose between attacking the man and exposing the animal to another fatal opening.

Sagiri measured the distance through his feet and Nokai's pressure, tracking the cat's breathing whenever it shifted weight from the injured leg. He could not overpower the pair without opening the Archive, yet doing so would erase the distinction between defeating Zaka and becoming the disaster the North already expected.

Sagiri took the second strike against Nokai's flat, allowing the impact to carry him away from his injured side before shifting one step and cutting Zaka's forearm.

The cut opened skin without reaching the bone, forcing Zaka to withdraw while the cat filled the space he had left and waited for the next command.

The creature stopped before committing, its gaze flicking toward Zaka as though the first duty remained his protection rather than the destruction of the enemy.

That hesitation gave Sagiri the answer he needed, revealing which life the creature would protect first and which movement could force it into the blade.

Sagiri stepped toward Zaka with the opening exposed, expecting the cat to cross the distance and turn its injured side away from Nokai.

The beast moved as he expected, leaping across the clearing while the Grand Chief prepared a killing strike through the space its body created.

Sagiri did not meet Zaka's weapon, choosing the cat as the immediate target while Nokai entered below its jaw and passed through the muscle behind it.

The impact traveled through Sagiri's arm as the creature's momentum carried it forward, so he guided the body away from Zaka and kept it from falling across his legs.

The great cat struck the ground on its side, scraping one claw through the ash before settling beside the first animal, while Zaka's blade stopped near Sagiri's throat.

His eyes had followed the creature instead of the target, leaving his arm extended and his balance open as Sagiri pushed the weapon aside with Nokai's guard.

Sagiri struck Zaka's elbow, forcing the joint to bend while the weapon slipped from his fingers, then caught the back of his knee before he could reclaim it.

The Grand Chief dropped to one hand and reached for the blade, but the surviving cat dragged itself toward him with a dark trail marking every movement.

Zaka turned toward the creature, extending his hand as its claws searched for soil that could no longer provide the strength needed to pull its body forward.

He said, "Stay with me," reaching toward the cat as the command left him without the authority he had used against armies.

The beast raised its head and touched its nose to his hand before settling beside the first cat, leaving Zaka's shoulders lowered when its final breath left the body.

Sagiri watched the two animals become still, then faced the Grand Chief while warriors stopped advancing and Salka's squad held the line, with no one daring to move before the decision became public.

Zaka rose without his weapon, steadying himself with one hand before he said, "You killed them," in a voice that carried through the watching ranks.

Sagiri kept Nokai at his side and opened his mouth to reply.

"You trained them to fight like you. It was only a matter of time before they died."

The Grand Chief approached with empty hands raised, refusing to move like a man surrendering and trying to force Sagiri to prove that the duel had never concerned the cats and he was just capable of his own. The two moved again and met him in crushing contact at the center of the clearing.

Zaka struck with his left hand and followed with his shoulder before driving a knee toward Sagiri's damaged ribs.

Sagiri absorbed the contact through his stance, answered with Nokai's pommel against Zaka's wrist, then shifted before the next strike and cut the outside of his thigh.

The blade did not cut deep, and Zaka continued forward, trying to seize him while Sagiri turned beneath the grip and struck the nerve beneath his jaw.

The man's legs faltered without giving way, so Sagiri struck his ankle and removed the last support beneath the stance that had carried him through the North.

Zaka dropped to one knee as the northern ranks reacted together, but Salka ordered, "Hold your line," standing before his squad, "the duel is not finished until Sagiri says it is."

Zaka pushed against the ground with his good hand while Sagiri placed Nokai beneath his chin, leaving every soldier to watch the Grand Chief fight for a position his body could no longer hold.

Sagiri could have killed him with the position and the blade, but death would end the lesson before Zaka understood what his creed had demanded from everyone beneath him.

He pressed the point closer, giving the Grand Chief one final chance to recognize the difference between defeat and judgment before the North decided what his title meant.

Across the northern line, several warriors lowered their weapons when they understood that Sagiri was not claiming Zaka's authority for himself, so Salka kept them still with one raised hand and watched Sagiri's blade. The next choice would decide whether the forest received a prisoner, a corpse, or another battle while every witness waited for a ruling no soldier wanted to make for either ruler.

Zaka's knee struck the earth again, and this time he remained there while the two great cats carrying his anger lay dead among the trees.

Sagiri looked toward the northern soldiers, then said, "You wanted me to fight like the monster you named, but I fought you as a man, and you still could not remain standing."

Zaka tightened his mouth and asked, "Then finish it," while Sagiri lowered the blade until its shadow crossed the Grand Chief's face.

Sagiri answered, "No, death would be mercy," and held the position as the strongest ruler in the North finally knelt before the man he had treated as an enemy for the North.

Chapter 379: A BETTER CHIEF

Zaka remained on one knee while the North waited for the sound of Nokai entering his throat. Every warrior had seen the Grand Chief defeated, but none knew what Sagiri intended to do with victory. They could not join the fight either. This was the chief's fight to finish.

Nokai rested beneath Zaka's jaw as Sagiri felt the pulse against the cold metal. It remained steady despite the duel; it was indeed true men of the north were not afraid of death.

Zaka Asakana's lips rebled as he gritted the next words.

"You owe the North an ending. Kill me and get done with it. KILL ME!!" Zaka roared, "A defeated chief cannot remain alive while his enemies stand over him."

Sagiri glanced at the two dead cats, whose bodies lay beneath the cedar and beside the place where Zaka had fallen, then replied,

"Your death means nothing to me, Zaka of the Asakana"

He continued, "You owe the north a ruler who can see the cost of his anger before he asks other people to pay it," keeping Nokai steady while Zaka tested the pressure under his jaw.

Zaka laughed once without strength and asked, "You came here to condemn me?"

Sagiri replied, "I could say I came because you attacked people under my protection, but this duel has always been meant to happen. Besides, you damaged your own land to reach me, and called that strength," then continued, "the condemnation belonged to your choices."

The Grand Chief pressed his good hand against the ground as Salka stepped forward with his weapon raised, while the northern soldiers waited to learn whether Zaka still commanded them.

Sagiri lifted Nokai from Zaka's throat, allowing the line to see that mercy had been a decision rather than an accident. Nokai hummed with the need to finish the chief.

Several warriors lowered their weapons by a fraction, and Zaka used that opening to stand before every soldier could mistake Sagiri's restraint for hesitation.

His legs shook beneath him, yet he forced them straight and faced the ranks. The effort felt more humiliating than the wound in his elbow because the army saw who had allowed him to rise.

Zaka said, "They will not follow a defeated man," as Sagiri moved beside him and placed both rulers in the same view of the northern line.

Sagiri said, "The north under you and under your ancestors taught them that the strongest must rule," then raised his voice toward the closest ranks, "You are no longer the strongest."

He added, "You lost the strength contest, so the title now belongs to someone who can carry it without sacrificing the people beneath it."

Uneven whispers moved through soldiers while Sagiri refused to call himself chief or crown anyone, using Zaka's creed to show how a rule built around strength could point back at its maker.

Zaka turned toward him and asked, "You think Kaka can rule this place?"

Sagiri remembered Kaka's broody face in the academy, the way he had stepped between rivals without asking for praise, and the loyalty hidden beneath his arrogance.

He answered, "Kaka is my friend, and he could become a better chief than you if the North gives him room to learn from your failure instead of repeating it. He has a better man to look up to now"

'This was now Salka's problem, ' Sagiri thought. He would choose to take the seat or shape the next great chief of the north. 'Kaka Asakana'

The Grand Chief asked, "You would hand my people to a boy?" His face tightened around the name.

Sagiri replied, "A boy is perhaps what the north needs as ruler. The south seems to be doing fine under one," then continued, "whether Kaka accepts it remains his choice, not mine."

Salka stepped between the northern ranks and the defeated ruler.

"Zaka, your army needs orders to leave the academy lands," Salka said. "And clearly without you, none of them are a worthy match for me." Salka almost snarled. Everyone knew of Salka's reputation, and he was the only man who could wish to even stand in the same light as the fallen chief.

After several breaths, Zaka asked, "You wish to take control of Galka from me? I lost to the supreme ruler of the south. I have not lost to you."

"I will take responsibility for the battlefield until the North decides what follows," Salka said. "That differs from stealing your title; I care not for the title."

The words earned no answer, so Salka turned toward his squad and pointed to the western line, where northern soldiers carried their wounded away from the broken trees.

Salka ordered, "Lotaga, secure the eastern road, keep the academy route open for healers," then continued, "no one touches the Grand Chief without my order, and no one follows Sagiri when he leaves."

Lotaga nodded and moved to obey, while the others separated wounded warriors from those still searching for a reason to continue the fight.

Sagiri watched Salka accept the burden without claiming the honor, recognizing the difference between power and leadership through the work being done around him.

Pressure shifted at the edge of the forest, carrying a presence beyond the northern roads with the same cold purpose that had struck Sagiri during the confrontation with Rika.

The Archive responded with a familiar hum, showing a distant blade beside a path running west toward the Safaya border before the memory vanished, leaving the direction behind.

Sagiri turned away from Zaka as Salka caught his arm and asked, "You are leaving now?"

Sagiri replied, "The presence I have been tracking has moved," then continued, "If I stay here any longer, the North will turn this battlefield into a war. Their chief has been wrongly defeated by an intruder. They would want a fight, and I tire of shedding blood."

Salka warned, "You are injured, surrounded by enemies, walking toward another army," while tightening his grip on Sagiri's arm.

Sagiri answered, "Don't tell me you fear I will die, Captain," while the pain in his ribs reminded him that the statement carried a price.

Salka warned, "If you die because you refused to wait for help, I will drag you back from whatever afterlife claims you, then kill you myself," after releasing Sagiri's arm.

Sagiri replied, "You would have to find me first."

Salka answered, "I have found you every time you tried to disappear," and the exchange settled a duty between them without either man pretending to grant permission.

Nokai folded into its compact form at Sagiri's side as he looked once toward the northern army, then toward Zaka, who remained upright only because Sagiri had chosen to spare him.

Sagiri said, "Tell Kaka I left him a problem."

"You beat his old man and demand to make him chief," Salka replied. "He might actually kill you first."

"Tell him this one is his choice," Sagiri said, then stepped through the western trees.

Behind him, Salka's squad and the warriors of Galka Academy inherited the battlefield by separating the wounded and restraining the angry soldiers who still wanted to continue the fight. They kept Zaka alive while the North began to realize that its strongest ruler no longer decided what would happen next.

The presence in the west moved again, drawing Sagiri toward the road beyond the North with Nokai, the Echo, and N'folu's unfinished grief carried into the next pursuit. He was oddly calm, but he could feel something beneath miles of the relics and the archive stir in anticipation

Chapter 380: WESTERN DECOY

Zaira dragged three long furrows through the dry soil, and N'varu left them untouched because the trail needed to look like anger before it looked like a plan.

The beast's claws had cut deep enough to expose pale stone beneath the dust, and the marks pointed north, opposite the roads Sagiri could use beyond the northwestern hills.

N'varu and the sandshades had left the academy before Sagiri's duel with Zaka.

N'varu had not lied about the idea, but Sagiri was buying them time, and now it was their turn.

Zaira whimpered with longing as it worked

'She wants to run north,' N'varu thought, watching the tremor move beneath her shoulder,

He crouched beside the first furrow and studied its angle against the low hills, choosing the line that made the border seem closer than the safer road behind them.

Zaira turned her head toward him, her eye bright with the complaint she could not put into words, and N'varu lifted one hand before she could scratch a fourth mark across the clearing.

"Walk there again," N'varu said, tapping the earth beside a flat stone, "let your weight fall as it would if you were still angry about being left behind."

Zaira's throat rolled with a low complaint, but she stepped forward after his palm settled against her foreleg, carrying her frustration into the ground instead of toward the Sandshades.

N'varu kept his hand against the rough hide while she moved, feeling the strength beneath it that could end every operative in the clearing before the first body struck the dust.

That strength was why the decoy had to look emotional, not obedient, because a creature like Zaira could be guided by trust but would never look believable wearing someone else's command.

"Sagiri would have sent you home if he believed this place could take you from him," N'varu said, watching her eye cut toward the northern hills, "but that is not the same as wanting you beside him now."

Zaira held his gaze for a breath, and N'varu could not tell whether she understood the words or only recognized the shape of the fear he carried into them.

Three Sandshades worked along the road, tying strips torn from one of Sagiri's old travel coats to thorn branches while another operative crushed the grass into the uneven stride his injured leg sometimes left behind.

The western tribes kept hunting snake beasts, and N'varu could only believe when the council held Sagiri, the Kun's snake beasts marked his scent.

Fooling beasts is not so easy. And her snake beasts were as cruel as the kun.

Doran held the final strip toward the light, testing its torn edge against the cloth already hanging from the branches, and asked whether the wind would take it before the western scouts reached the ridge.

"Loop it once," Doran said, answering his own concern with a glance toward the road, "twice will look deliberate, and the West already has enough reasons to distrust a gift."

N'varu took the strip from him and tied it to the thorn branch with one quick motion, keeping the knot loose enough to pull free if the wind changed direction.

"Once is enough," N'varu said, keeping his eyes on the branch, "do not risk your life to make a signal prettier than required."

Doran stepped back and checked the angle against the sun, using the same patient care N'varu had taught the Sandshades before Sagiri ever needed a decoy.

The second operative dragged one heel through the grass, copying the uneven step Sagiri used whenever an old wound weakened his right leg, then turned away before the mark became too clean.

N'varu watched the false print form and lowered his head, since a trail that moved smoothly would tell an experienced tracker more than one that carried a believable weakness.

Zaira pressed one paw into the streambed beside the trail, and the print sank deep, reading as fury rather than performance when the scouts viewed it from the ridge.

N'varu carried the three stones across a second path and set them down again, making the false route suggest that Sagiri had turned east after meeting resistance near the first crossing.

He studied the arrangement from a distance and corrected one stone by half a handspan, because the first version looked like a message and the second looked like a hurried decision.

'He never takes the safe road when someone he loves is at risk,' N'varu thought, testing the trail against every mission they had survived, 'Nakia will recognize desperation.'

The Sandshades broke camp before midday and moved toward a low ridge where the false trail would remain visible from several roads, leaving the eastern route untouched behind them.

N'varu placed Zaira at the center of the new camp, then left an empty bedroll beside broken spear shafts wrapped to resemble a weapon someone had carried into the hills.

He positioned two Sandshades near the bedroll with their shoulders turned toward the space, making them look like guards protecting a sleeper.

'This has to survive a second look,' he thought, adjusting the torn blanket, 'a scout who trusts the first impression is useful, but Nakia will inspect the third.'

"Keep your hands away from the bundle unless someone forces you to prove what it contains," N'varu told the group.

Doran looked at the empty bedroll and shifted his stance so his shadow fell across the bundle, then asked what he should say if the western soldiers demanded a name.

"Say that we are moving north because the road is open," N'varu answered, checking the torn blanket, "do not offer a story you don't need to."

A signal passed from one western hill to another before the sun cleared the ridge, a yellow flare.

'They are not guessing anymore,' he thought, watching the two pale flashes answer across the valley, 'someone above that scout already believes the trail is real.'

He crouched beside Zaira as the first scout descended halfway toward the camp, feeling her breathing change beneath his palm while the animal measured the distance to the northern road.

A scout stopped beside a stone marker with one hand clear of his weapon, his eyes moving from the torn cloth to the empty bedroll and then toward the beast crouched beyond the ridge.

"We keep moving," N'varu said, checking the ridges without turning his head, "the basin is where they want Sagiri, which makes it the place they will keep watching after the real trail disappears."

Zaira advanced with her head lowered, and the Sandshades closed around her without drawing a blade, allowing the western soldiers to mistake caution for containment.

More soldiers appeared along three ridges as the group entered the basin, blocking the road behind them while leaving a curved path open toward deeper stone.

N'varu counted the banners twice, separating ordinary border troops from the smaller formation carrying Kun Nakia's private crest near the eastern ridge.

'She placed her best fighters where Zaira would want to run,' he thought, watching shields settle into position, 'that is not the work of a commander guessing at a decoy.'

As Zaira's claws tested the soil, N'varu crouched beside her and kept his hand against her foreleg, feeling the answer travel through muscle before it reached the ground.

"Hold here while the eastern line measures the distance," N'varu said, glancing toward the shields.

"They are testing how far you will move for the Sandshades."

Zaira pressed her claws into the soil without answering, and her breathing settled into the rhythm N'varu knew from every fight she had chosen to survive instead of win outright.

Banners shifted on the highest ridge, and Kun Nakia stepped into view with four officers behind her, her dark armor outlined against the last red light.

"Show me, Sagiri," Kun Nakia called across the basin, lifting her voice over the soldiers, "Come out and play supreme ruler of the south."

N'varu stepped between her banners and Zaira's lowered head, keeping his shoulders loose because the West was watching for the first movement that could justify a strike.

"You already have us surrounded. Why not come closer and talk with Sagiri?" N'varu answered, resting one hand against Zaira's leg. "You still have to decide whether your army can beat what is standing in front of it."

Kun Nakia's attention moved over Zaira and the Sandshades.

Zaira's body rose above the watch huts, blocking the ridgeline, while N'varu felt her anger travel through the ground, and the nearest western officers tilted their heads back to see her.

"Hold," N'varu said, keeping his voice low enough for her alone.

Zaira stayed where she was, and Kun Nakia raised one hand as the western army closed the roads around the basin without ordering its soldiers to attack.

"If the abomination is not here," Nakia said, turning toward her officers, "I will assume you are a decoy or foolish."

N'varu looked north, where Sagiri's real trail had already moved beyond the reach of the watching banners, then returned his attention to the Kun before she could read relief in his face.

N'varu kept his palm against her foreleg until the western banners stopped shifting, then let the Sandshades see the smallest motion of his fingers that meant the real road was safe for another hour.

Zaira did not look north again, but her weight eased away from the trapped path, and N'varu understood that she had accepted the lie because it protected the person she wanted to reach.

'The West has the basin,' he thought, watching Kun Nakia study the empty bedroll, 'Sagiri has the distance, and Zaira had given them both without surrendering a single step.'

No one would move against the beast unless they were stupid enough.