

Witch 741

Chapter 741: The Art of Sound Transmission.....

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Roland wiped the fine sweat beads from Anna's forehead and held her in his arms.

In the dim light, he could still see the attractive blush on her face.

Roland had the feeling that Anna had become more active in this regard since the last time they talked about the Dream World. She also tried to learn some new tricks—though her progress was much slower than her learning from books. Anna's clumsy and serious manner gave him an entirely new experience. His visual enjoyment far surpassed the sensory experience and he could not help but feel a sense of superiority as an old hand.

Of course, they would not miss the storytelling session after their time of joy.

As he was indulging in Anna's fragrance, Roland started to narrate in detail the news brought by the Taquila Witches as well as his speculation about the Battle of Divine Will.

"Although we've already known that where we live is no larger than a corner of the mainland, I didn't expect that there were actually completely different civilizations scattered beneath the mountains... this world is really full of unknowns!" Anna sighed and said, "Perhaps one day, we can also set foot on that faraway land to see what kind of secrets are hidden in that world across the sea."

"I promise that day will come," Roland answered with a smile.

Even if they could not travel by sea, they could still fly over it—any land that could be seen through the telescope would not be too far away. As long as they had the internal combustion engine, the large airship could come into play.

"But does God really exist? He left relics causing us to fight against one another... maybe he is now looking at us from somewhere."

"Are you afraid?" Roland could not resist holding her even closer.

"No, I want to thank him."

"What for?" Roland was a little surprised.

"For he sent you to me." Anna looked up and whispered.

Roland saw the rippling blue lake in her eyes—that was her unconcealed emotions.

He felt a warm current surging in his heart.

"I'll always be with you."

"But you can't stay with me all the time."

"I..."

Anna covered his mouth before he could finish speaking.

"You're the king and also the future commander of the army that will combat the Army of Demons. How could you stay forever in Neverwinter? I can't possess you entirely just for my personal desire. The soldiers who fight in the front line need to see your presence and your subjects in the other cities want you to be with them," she said softly, "Roland, I'm already very content that I can listen to your stories like this."

Roland was silent for a moment. "You're right. But wherever I am in the future, you will always be able to hear my stories... I promise you this."

Anna blinked, as if she had heard the meaning behind his words. "Without the Sigil of Listening?"

"Exactly." He nodded.

How could they speak out their words of love if they had to communicate through the Sigil of Listening?

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll let you know tomorrow." Roland rolled over and lay on top of Anna, then kissed her neck... and slipped all the way from her neck to the clavicle, leaving a shallow mark on her fine, tight skin. "But, now it's my turn."

Once again, they became one, and their sweet breathing sounds rising and falling for a long time before fading away.

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The next day after breakfast, the invigorated Roland walked into the backyard of North Slope Mountain with Anna.

"Good morning, Your Majesty." Lucia, who had arrived even earlier, put her work aside and bowed before him.

"Good morning, Your Majesty! Good morning, Sister Anna! Sister Nightingale!" Ring followed the actions of her sister, and started to bow and cry out cheerfully.

Roland waved his hand with a smile, indicating that they did not have to be too formal. Then he walked to the workbench and pulled out a piece of white paper on which he started to draw a design. He intended to carry out the promise he had made last night to Anna before the Taquila survivors moved to the Western Region—a communication tool that he could use to speak to Anna at any time without magic.

That would be the wire telephone.

The principle of the telephone was very simple and that was the most basic application of electromagnetic induction: the sound wave would vibrate the metal reed in the voice tube causing the change of the magnetic flux formed in the magnetic field, and finally a fluctuant induced current would be generated. While the earpiece, on the contrary, would use the magnetic force generated by the electromagnetic coil to vibrate the membrane and reduce the current into voice.

In other words, it was fundamentally the same as a generator or an electric motor, except that the latter turned the vibration into a rotation and had a much larger power.

As soon as he articulated his idea and design, Anna immediately understood how this unprecedented calling tool worked.

"Let me get Mystery Moon and Soraya!" Her eyes shone with excitement.

"Electric current... exchange with voice?" After hearing what Roland had said, Nightingale still had a vacant look on her face, and when she turned to see if Lucia had understood, she found Lucia was also pondering.

"Electricity and magnetism originate from each other, and the magnetism turns into power... I see."

Even the little girl Ring also showed off her knowledge. "Sister, are you talking about something in the second chapter of 'Elementary Physics'?"

All of these reactions suddenly frustrated Nightingale. She gloomily picked up a dried fish and walked into the Mist.

Roland could not hold back his laughter at this scene. He knew that although the principle was simple, it was not that easy to make a functional phone, and the problem lay in the signal transmission.

The electrical signal would abate.

That was the reason why the phone was not widely used in the early stage after it was invented—once the distance between the callers was too long, it was hard for one side to hear exactly what the other side was saying. The phone was not widely used until the electron tube that could amplify the signal was invented.

Roland was not very good at electricity, so he barely wrote about it in his books. Even now that he had the help of the Dream World, he still found it quite problematic to make an electron tube.

Since he did not intend to amplify the signal, there was only one way to do it—by reducing the attenuation.

For example, increase the size of the wire and reduce the loss of the signal in the route.

The former was very simple to achieve. The required copper wire could be accurately processed by Anna's Blackfire. According to the knowledge he had acquired from his Dream World, a 4 mm diameter wire could be used to maintain a 50 or 60 km communication without a repeater, while the general telephone connecting wire was only 0.4 to 0.6 mm in diameter. Although it was somewhat wasteful to use the thick wire, it could effectively avoid the trouble of having to make a signal amplifier.

The latter could be achieved through coaxial-cable—the so-called coaxial-cable was made by wrapping the wire with a layer of metal mesh which would be sandwiched by the two wires that were coated with insulating materials and turned into a Faraday cage so as to minimize the divergence of the electrical signal. Before the telephone came into widespread use, the technology of wrapping the metal layer was not mature yet, so at that time, people used the loading coil, which meant overlapping the wire with a spirally wound coil casing to reduce the signal loss. But Roland did not need to follow this rule since he had Anna's processing skill and Soraya's special coating that could complete it in one step.

Chapter 742: Love From a Distance

Combining the two techniques should allow the telephone signal to be read as far as a few hundred kilometers without a relay, which basically lets it cover most of the residential areas in the Western Region, and would allow Neverwinter to receive real-time updates from the defensive line in the Impassable Mountain Range.

If he wanted to further extend the range, he would then have to use a signal relay.

The reason why Roland chose to develop the wire telephone was not only because he was inspired by Anna's words, but also because of the vast usage and practicability of this tool. It would serve as a crucial piece for controlling the political situation, enhancing the centralization of the government, and commanding the wartime efforts.

More importantly, the industrial projects in Neverwinter had already reached a saturation point.

The new immigrants still had to pass the primary education before they can be absorbed into the various industries. The four major industries—civil construction, mineral processing, machine manufacturing, and chemical production—had occupied over 90% of the workforce. According to current predictions, it would not be difficult for these four industries to employ 60,000 to 70,000 new immigrants once they pass through primary education.

As these industries were vital for future war efforts, their production could not be interrupted. On the other hand, the bicycle plant, which was enthusiastically built by Roland in the beginning, wasn't even able to meet the demand of the First Army. The city hall would first shut down the bicycle factory whenever there is a power shortage and reallocate the workers to the steam engine plant whenever there is a shortage of manpower.

Even though construction on Kingdom Main Street and Route 67 had already been completed, and Border Area neither raised horses nor stables for horses to rest in, the roads were still mainly used by carriages that came from the Longsong Area or other cities. Also, with the construction of the railway already underway, the citizens never did start riding bicycles between the Border Area and the Longsong Area.

Of course, Roland would never admit to Barov that he had made this strategic mistake. Since then, he would always take into account of Neverwinter's production capability when planning for new facilities.

The phone happened to be a good product that wouldn't burden Neverwinter's output, and it also does not require much maintenance.

First of all, Roland would not provide telephone to the market. He would only provide it for military communication purposes and basic communication between the Border Area and the Longsong Area. Roland only intended to lay down a one-to-one cable that connects both sides. In this way, it would save him the time and energy of setting up a complex wire network.

Secondly, starting with a limited number of telephone systems meant that it would only require Anna, Mystery Moon, and Soraya to help out during their spare time without having to utilize Neverwinter's labour force.

Moreover, once they manage to produce vacuum tubes, they could develop telecommunication for the public.

Therefore, the wire telephone is the most appropriate project to start with before exploring the Great Snow Mountain with the Taqila survivors.

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The prototyping stage of manufacturing phones went smoother than he had expected. By afternoon, two basic telephones containing magnetic speakers appeared in the backyard of North Slope Mountain.

It had no shell and looked like an assembly of a coil of wire and magnets. It was equipped with a hand-operated generator and a "Mini Dawn" battery. Due to the low power requirements, the battery was only as thick as a finger and could last for at least a month, saving him from the trouble of making an independent dry battery.

"How does this work?" Mystery Moon asked curiously, "Can my ability really do this?"

Roland naturally ignored the second half of her sentence. "It's very simple. Watch carefully... This hand-operated generator is used to start a call. When the user rotates it quickly..." He grabs the handle and rotates it forcibly, and the magnetic bell on the other side suddenly rang out a sound of "jingling". "That ringing means that there's a call coming."

He gave Anna a glance, and she picked up the earpiece and the voice tube.

"When the earpiece is picked up and the switch pops up, it means the voice line is connected and people on both sides can start talking. The current that transmits the electrical signals is provided by Mini Dawn, so without this copper bar enchanted by Mystery Moon, the telephone can only ring but no sound would be transmitted."

"Oh, I see!" Mystery Moon thrust her chest out and vigorously nodded her head twice.

"Your Majesty, may I try speaking through it?" Soraya was eager to try.

"And me." Ring raised her hand up high.

"Of course... It was created by all of you, and naturally, you're eligible to be the first few to experience this era-defining communication tool." Roland laughed. There was no need to explain the significance of the phone, since it completely changed how humans could communicate with each other across distant worlds. "There will be no signal attenuation in such a small yard, so connecting the phone with ordinary copper wire will do."

In a quiet, snow-covered forest, a crisp bell rang out continuously. Obviously, they could talk through the phone directly, but they insisted on starting over again, from the step of rotating the handle to generate electricity.

"There really is a voice!"

"It sounds like Lucia!"

"Uh, what should I say?"

"Let her guess who you are!"

The witches, who were separated by the wall, were vying to shout at the voice tube. For a few moments, peals of laughter echoed from both ends of the yard.

Roland also tried out listening twice. To be honest, he thought the prototype wasn't very good. The voice he heard fluctuated a lot and there was a lot of static. Anyways, it was definitely not up to standard. But he knew that as long as he kept adjusting the size of the metal reed and the space between the electromagnets, he would find the right parameters for the best call quality.

Soon, the voice tube reached Roland's hand once again.

He shook his head with a smile and placed the earpiece beside his ear and habitually said, "Hello?"

He heard nothing but interference from the weak conductance of the copper cable.

For some reason, he knew who it was on the other side of the phone as if their hearts were linked.

"Anna...?" Roland whispered.

After a moment, he heard a slightly distorted reply.

"I like you... Roland."

After protecting Roland for a whole day, Nightingale returned to her bedroom in a bad mood.

This was not the first time she felt like this because she did not understand anything that the others were saying. And every time this happened, only dried fish and ice cream bread could comfort her.

Well... now there were also the Chaos Drinks.

She truly envied the intimacy between Roland and Anna. Meanwhile, a faint but unceasing bitterness flooded her. She thought that she would get used to it sooner or later, but it turned out to be harder than she had imagined.

The more invested she got in her feelings, the deeper the thorns dug into her heart.

Now Nightingale somewhat understood what Wendy had told her.

She walked to the table and pulled open the drawer, but she found out that the bottle inside was empty.

Did I take the wrong one?

So she pulled open another drawer and found that bottle inside was empty too.

"Wendy? My Chaos..." As soon as Nightingale turned around, she was hugged by her roommate, and Wendy's ample bosom almost squeezed her out of breath.

"Nightingale, how many years have we known each other? You've been with me since you left the Gilen Family in Silver City, right?"

"Yeah... almost four or five years, but my Chaos..."

"We've experienced so many dangers and hardships along the way before today. Nothing can undermine our friendship, right?"

"Of course, I've always treated you like a sister, but my Chaos..."

"I drank all your drinks. I'm sorry!" Wendy held her even closer. "I'll definitely make it up to you with my share next month."

What? All of them?

Nightingale fumbled the bag of dried fish and felt that it was empty too.

Only dried fish, ice cream bread, and Chaos Drinks can comfort her.

Now, all of them were gone.

Nightingale heard a crack in her heart.

In an instant, the bitterness flooded her once again.

Chapter 743: The Desert Mission

Even with his eyes closed, Iron Axe could still smell the unique odor of the yellow sands around him.

Today was the fourth day since he had entered the desert and the third week since his army had left Neverwinter. After the end of this week, two-thirds of the winter season would have passed and the coldest period, mid-winter, would start. However, unlike the snowy Western Region, the Months of Demons had less influence here, leaving the area almost untouched. Although the sky maintained a shade of oppressive gray, there was at least no piercing northerly wind and icy snow that could freeze the whole desert.

As Silver Stream did not converge with any other rivers and flowed mainly underground, the army had no choice but to make its way on foot. Rather than following the original plan, which was to wait for the 500 new recruits who were stationed in the Palisade City to be ready and then incorporating them into the army to move together, Iron Axe decided to leave those recruits to Brian and marched alone so that he could reach Iron Sand City faster.

Recruits might perform well during on-the-spot firing, but they would not be able to survive a journey of continuous marching on foot. Moreover, the situation would barely be improved even with the addition of 500 people.

He understood very well that His Majesty's mission could not be accomplished by cannon attack or aggression. The First Army would be there to ensure victory, but it would not be the means to conquer the Sand Nation.

Mojins had a set of traditional solutions.

As for the 500 recruits, all they needed to do was seize Silver Stream Oasis to ensure that the frontline troops would not be flanked.

In the Southernmost Region, an oasis was a lifeline. Whether people intended to attack or flee, they could not live without an oasis.

The tribal people of the Sand Nation could feel the formidable vigor coming from the veteran soldiers who were marching orderly on the road even without witnessing the power of the flintlocks. No one dared to walk up and question the soldiers coming from Graycastle but just whispered behind them after they had filled their water packs, got fed, and set out again.

Iron Axe estimated that, at this rate, the First Army should be able to reach Iron Sand City before nightfall.

"I'm a little confused. Can one initiate the so-called holy duel at any time in any season?" A beautiful blonde woman walked toward Echo and her fine skin was in sharp contrast to that of the princess of the Osha clan. "Even noblemen could refuse the honor challenge between themselves if they were unwell. On such a cold day, everyone would want to stay near a warm stove the entire day instead of going out and fighting, right? I mean... what should we do if someone refuses the request for a holy duel?"

Iron Axe remembered the lady's name was Andrea, a combat witch who often followed Princess Tilly. As His Majesty once said, there ought to be just one Extraordinary, Ashes, to help them, but somehow Andrea ended up joining the campaign as well.

"No matter how unwilling you are, you have to fight when someone picks up an axe, rushes into your house, and kicks your stove." Ashes curled her lip. "Do you think this contest which, to some extent, determines the life and death of a clan will follow the hypocritical rules of the nobility?"

"That's called a sneak attack or a massacre, not a duel," Andrea said disdainfully, "even though Mojins are barbarians, they're still able to distinguish between the two. Do you think that everyone is as ignorant as you?"

"I can see you really are a 'well-learned person' by saying that in front of Echo."

"Stop misinterpreting my words!"

Iron Axe was not bothered about being called a barbarian as he knew that people in Border Town were not judged by their identities. This was something His Majesty had told him personally. Other than being a Mojin, he had a more important identity and that was being a resident of Neverwinter.

Iron Axe did not respond to the dispute between Ashes and Andrea until he received Echo's gaze calling for help. He cleared his throat and explained voluntarily. "Lady Andrea's concern was not misplaced. Certainly, the holy duel can't be refused and must be done when both opponents are well prepared to earn the approval from the Three Gods. But it doesn't mean that the duel can be initiated at any time by anyone's will. The first requirement for the duel is that the challenger must be qualified to fight."

"What kind of qualifications are needed?"

"First of all, it must be an entire Mojin clan," Iron Axe said briefly, "One person can't represent a clan and this rule applies to even a chief or a princess. This rule is to prevent a situation where a dozen

people occupy one-sixth of Iron Sand City. In addition, the rule also excludes foreigners. Iron Sand City allows foreigners to fight for the clans but excludes them from the central power positions."

"Does that mean that we are not eligible at all?" Ashes raised her eyebrow. "It has been years since Echo was exiled and the Osha clan has disappeared long ago. Or should we start by looking for her surviving clansmen?"

"No one is able to survive Endless Cape," Iron Axe said as he shook his head, "but we can use another method. For example, making Lady Silvermoon the chief of a new clan is allowed."

"Is this... possible?" Andrea was surprised.

"Mojins don't value bloodlines like you people do. They value one's ability more than lineage." The commander-in-chief of the First Army said calmly, "After satisfying the first criterion, any clan that is able to stand their ground in one of the small oases around the Iron Sand City qualifies for the duel. There are a total of four small oases that newly rising clans always fight in and that's why these four oases are also called the bloodstained place."

"They are like admission tickets, right?" Ashes did not take it seriously.

"You could say that. In fact, these clans generally fall into two categories," Iron Axe paused, "challenger... and watchdog."

"Watchdog?" The blonde witch's curiosity was piqued.

"These are the obstacles set by the top clans who are unwilling to see the order in Iron Sand City change too much." Echo was the one who replied this time. "They rely on their huge resources and influence to recruit a large number of warriors to form a mixed clan that has its roots in the small oases. Watchdogs won't seek a holy duel with their owners, yet they occupy the positions of the challenger. Despite not being allowed to enter Iron Sand City, they live quite well relying on the water and food supplied by the small oases."

"They sound like hounds that are willing to eat leftovers." Ashes sneered. "That is a very appropriate name."

"As the holy duel is full of variables, the big clans would try to rope in or bribe the potential challengers stationed in the bloodstained place. My father was reluctant to be a watchdog so he was determined to initiate a holy duel with Iron Whip clan, yet he ended up with..." Echo's voice became despondent as she was reminded of her distressing past.

"They'll pay for their insidious behavior that year, Lady Silvermoon." Iron Axe comforted her. "Death is coming for them now."

"So we need to find a challenger first, whose chief will be replaced by Echo, before we challenge the six big clans?" Andrea asked.

"Once people start to settle down, they'll lose their motivation to go forward. One who has occupied a small oasis and doesn't challenge others immediately will very likely become a new watchdog. After that, it won't be easy to overpower him by words or by force," Iron Axe said slowly, "since we are under the king's order and carrying thunder and grace with us, there is no need to do it in such an

inconvenient way. Any humble clan will become unstoppable with the First Army backing it up. We will just crush anyone who dares to stand in His Majesty's way."

Chapter 744: One Who Seeks a Revenge

Thuram's favorite activity was sitting on the second floor of a tavern and watching customers coming and going downstairs.

This was his tavern and his territory, so Thuram named it "Skull Cup" for his own preference and re-decorated it. He even hung a string of incomplete skulls at the entrance as the sign of the tavern.

However, it was not called this name five years ago.

"What was it called at that time?" Thuram wondered.

"Was it called Elf Forest... or Elf Garden? Anyway, it doesn't matter now." Thuram drank some spirits with fire lantern fruit in them, letting the hot taste flood his tongue. "Such a delicate name didn't fit the bloodstained place, since there's no elf or elf-like woman here but quite a lot of bones."

After each battle, a pile of dead bodies would be left outside the Iron Sand City. He preferred bones, especially the skulls, which had been baked in hot sands, rather than perishable flesh.

First, the skulls were intimidating, so it would let troublemakers understand what kind of place this was.

Second, it indeed could hold wine, saving him from buying more wine glasses.

After all, the former did not work for everyone. There were always some idiots born with deformed brains who thought that they could treat everywhere like their own backyards and that their adversaries were no better than women who knew nothing but weeping. In a place where troublemakers appeared frequently, brittle pottery and glass were not ideal vessels.

Gazing at every customer was a habit that Thuram had developed in recent years. People who traveled in and out of this land were generally divided into three kinds: the half-dead ones, the moribund ones, and the dead ones—he preferred to distinguish people in this way rather than by their identities. The half-dead ones' purpose of coming here was very simple, which was drinking, gambling, and women; as long as they maintained their current state, they could basically finish the rest of their journeys. The moribund ones were mostly watchdogs or challengers who came to inquire about the situation. They had already put their lives under the blades that would swing and behead them at any time.

As to the dead ones... they were undoubtedly the troublemakers.

Thuram's attention was fixed on neither the half-dead ones nor the dead ones, for the former were very boring, and the latter gave him joy only when they were dying. It was the moribund ones he liked most because he could see in them a mirror image of his younger self.

At that time, he was just like them, holding a sharp knife in his hand and fighting in the bloodstained place, an admiring place for many clans, yet he always had his sights set on Iron Sand City.

His courage, audacity, and strength were being drained from him until one day someone replaced him as the new owner of the small oasis... He had to beg for a chance to survive. At last, he became part of the bloodstained place, yet he turned from the moribund one into the half-dead one during this alteration.

The moribund ones, though they had already placed their lives under the blades, still had the chance to skyrocket when the time came. They could break out of the cocoons or rise from the ashes. But the half-dead ones would never have this kind of opportunity. They could only seek some form of entertainment to comfort them for the rest of their lives.

Such as, watching the travelers who pass by these oases... who might perish in the sands or take over as the new owner of this place.

At this moment, one of his men pushed open the door, walked to him, and whispered in his ear.

"Oh? Are you sure about that?" Thuram was startled.

"He said so, and from the look of the woman beside him... she is probably a Divine Lady."

Thuram pondered for a while, then a malicious smile appeared on his face. "Take them in. Remember to take away their weapons. This guy is a hard nut to crack."

"Yes."

"See? There's a big fun coming now," Thuram could not help thinking.

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There were a total of two visitors whose bodies were hidden under loose ropes, but Thuram could still distinguish that they were a man and a woman. When the tall man took off his hood and showed his face, Thuram could not help but squint. "I didn't expect to see you one day, Iron Axe."

"The things that you can't expect are way more than stars reflected on the oasis. Nothing strange about that." Iron Axe served the woman her seat, and then calmly walked over to sit opposite him. "But now... you should know what I'm coming for."

"Probably." Thuram shrugged. As an old citizen of Sand Nation, he knew every holy duel held in the Land of Fire. Some of the moribund ones could indeed rise from ashes, but most of them turned into complete dead bodies, and the Osha clan was one of them... Although he had heard that some accidents happened during the duel, it made no difference to the end result. "But you shouldn't have returned, for Iron Whip clan is no longer the way it was."

Thuram had thought of recruiting Iron Axe who used to be quite a renowned hybrid warrior—Thuram didn't let his initial ambition die away even after he had to serve a watchdog, and he always imagined that his clan would one day reoccupy the small oasis and enter the holy land of the duel.

But it was years ago.

But now... he just wanted to have some fun.

"Yeah? That's exactly what I want," Iron Axe said with disapproval, "I thought they'd been thrown out of Iron Sand City by the other challengers and were now rotting away in some isolated corner. Now it seems that the Three Gods haven't completely fallen asleep."

Thuram frowned, for he did not remember that this hybrid warrior was a man of grandiloquence. "I understand your eagerness for the revenge. But a revenge carried out by someone who's not qualified is nothing less than suicide." As he said this, he turned to look at the silent woman. "Even though the Osha clan owns a Divine Lady, it won't narrow the gap between your clan and the Iron Whip Clan. Moreover, since most of the exiles of that year had already died, what difference can you make with just the two of you?"

"That's why I have come to you, Thuram," Iron Axe said. The words he said seemed very natural to himself but made Thuram's heart thud. Iron Axe continued, "Your clan is still located in this oasis, am I right? Eight years ago, it was a challenger, just like Osha clan, and should have had a chance to control part of Iron Sand City but ended up being a watchdog, and later... It became less than a watchdog. Seeing your clansmen reduced to being slaves of other clans, didn't you feel remorseful? Now we offer you a chance to, once again, touch the wall of Iron Sand City if you pledge your loyalty to Lady Drow Silvermoon."

Thuram was stunned for a moment before he burst into laughter.

"Ha ha ha ha ha..."

It was indeed a rare joke since there was nothing more interesting than seeing a mad avenger destroy himself, but Thuram did not expect that this man was trying to divert the joke to him.

"So you want to make this little girl the new chief of a clan before initiating a holy duel? Even her father is not above me, and now you want me to serve her? Perhaps you can find some good helpers who will be able to do some tricks in the duel, but what can I benefit from this? Call my slave clansmen to fight against the watchdogs till they are left with a mass of injuries, and then warmly send you to Iron Sand City?"

Thuram's tone turned a bit hideous on the final words. "Tell me, Iron Axe, what benefits can you offer me so that I won't tell the Iron Whip clan the whereabouts of this Miss Drow Silvermoon in exchange for a generous reward? I guess they'll be very interested in torturing a Divine Lady of their former enemy."

Chapter 745: Furious Thunder

Iron Axe didn't fly into a rage as had been expected, he didn't even have a change in facial expression, which surprised Thuram slightly. Thuram remembered that in the past, this mixed-blood would never allow anyone to threaten the princess of Osha, not even verbally.

He couldn't help but look over at Drow Silvermoon, only to find the Divine Lady had no reaction either. It appeared as if she did not care about her own safety at all.

What were they thinking?

Thuram felt for the God's Stone of Retaliation in his pocket, his fierce expression frozen on his face.

"In fact, I'd never rest our hope on you to defeat the watchdogs. Since you didn't do it eight years ago, I know you don't have the guts... At least you're not as brave as you claim," Iron Axe slowly said, "I'm not returning only for revenge."

His first half of his words stung Thuram to his core, but the second half slightly shocked him.

"Not just for revenge?"

"I'm going to challenge the six clans to make Osha the strongest clan." Iron Axe said word by word.

Although the clans in Iron Sand City managed the oasis together, they were not considered equal. It was universally acknowledged that the strongest would occupy the best area in the city. If another clan desired that area, they had to challenge the clans that ranked above them. For the Osha clan, which had nothing, it meant they had to defeat all six of the clans to take the core area of Iron Sand City.

Only a crazy person would try to do that.

The path of challenges could not be interrupted once it had started, which meant that they had to win six challenges in succession. Each battle would require a ridiculous amount of physical exertion. This will make people desperate, not to mention their opponents would be first-class Mojin warriors. Generally speaking, it takes clan warriors over six months to recover from a holy duel. If a warrior died a new one had to be re-cultivated or recruited.

Basically, the clans with the most resources have the most solid foundations. Wildflame, the First Clan, had occupied the position for decades.

Avengers varied greatly, so it was hard to classify them.

Some of them hit their mark on the first shot, while others lost everything. It was not unusual to see some of them hesitate or even give up during preparation. So they might be half-dead, the moribund, or dead... Undoubtedly, only a crazy man would belong to the last type.

That left nothing to talk about.

Thuram found that he no longer enjoyed listening to them. They were biting off more than they could chew by attempting to avenge the Ironwhip Clan. Not to mention they were even claiming they would challenge the whole Iron Sand City? Just thinking of it made him anxious. He had no intention of being implicated in the trouble, so he directly shouted, "Boys, catch this guy as well as that woman!"

There were four clansmen standing in the room and two standing outside the door, all of them were holding sharp blades and God's Stones. They already had an advantage in numbers; in addition, Iron Axe and the Divine Lady's weapons had been confiscated before they entered the room. No matter how strong Iron Axe was, it would be impossible for them to escape.

"I should be greatly rewarded for killing the mixed-blood and for giving the descendant of Osha to the Iron Whip clan," he thought. "Maybe I can regain my position as the watchdog for this small oasis."

Just then, the princess of Osha stood up and sneered, while she took off her hood, removing the thin veil that covered her face.

Her dark hair cascaded down her shoulders as her beautiful face was revealed. She was indeed a Divine Lady, but... she was not Drow Silvermoon who Thuram was familiar with.

None of the Sand women would have a snow-white complexion like her.

Her long dark hair spilled down her back like a waterfall and her golden pupils shone with dangerous light.

"Who... are..."

Thuram hadn't even finished his words, while the woman easily dodged a strike from a clansman in front of her and then punched another clansman in his face.

The dark-haired Divine Lady didn't need to use a weapon, her fists were actually more powerful than iron hammers. With a muffled thump, the clansman directly in front of her had been knocked into the air and smashed through the wooden wall, falling from the second floor!

"...you?"

As he finished his query, a second clansman had been hit and also thrown through the wall.

The tavern immediately fell into chaos.

A chilly gust of wind blew in, swaying the flames in the fireplace.

The Divine Lady didn't stop fighting, instead, she moved as if dancing with the wind. Her shadow was amplified by the firelight and it horrified Thuram. "Why? Didn't my clansmen all wear God's Stone of Retaliation?"

He had bought the God's stones from Graycastle with lots of gold royals. Common people deserved to have a chance when fighting the Divine Ladies, but why was she not restrained by the magic stone at all?

The fourth clansman fell to the ground, spitting blood. He had been kicked in the spine by her from behind and almost snapped him in half.

Even a diving Four-winged Eagle couldn't hit more powerfully than that!

No one lasted more than one round. In just a moment, Iron Axe, the Divine Lady, and Thuram were the only ones left standing.

"Damn it, come here quickly, all of you. Someone is causing trouble on the second floor."

"Where's our Head?"

"Why the hell didn't you watch the door?"

"A guest has been smashed to death!"

Rapid footsteps could be heard on the stairs. By the sound of it, many people were coming to the Head's room, unfortunately, the tip of a blade had been placed against Thuram's throat.

"Wait, don't come in, all of you!" He shouted at the door, regardless of the piercing pain where the blade had nicked his skin. A cold sweat oozed from the pores on his forehead.

"Head?"

"Go downstairs! Now!"

Thuram sadly found that Iron Axe had been right, and his courage was indeed less than what he claimed. In the face of a death threat, his first thought was to compromise rather than fight against it. Perhaps, from the beginning, he was never a moribund who had the hope of rising from the ashes like a phoenix. Instead, he was a half-dead who was trapped by his hesitation.

"Now can we talk about it?" Iron Axe said calmly.

"Even if I promised, nothing would change! The watchdogs here are supported by the Iron Whip and Cut Bone clans. You have made such a mess here. Do you think they won't know it? Iron Sand City will hear the news tomorrow!" Thuram growled, "It's impossible to summon the clansmen within such a short time. Besides, most of them have become slaves to other clans. Even if they're willing to come back, they'll be defeated easily by the warriors cultivated by the larger clans. If you don't want to die here, you'd better escape from the oasis now!"

"As I said before, I didn't expect you to defeat the watchdogs."

Thuram grit his teeth and thought, "What does he mean? If he really is so powerful, why doesn't he become a challenger directly? Why does he want my support?"

Unless... Unless the force he gathered hadn't been from the Southernmost Region!

When the realization hit, the old Head felt his heart tremble in horror.

Did they launch the holy duel in the name of another clan?

Suddenly, they heard thunder dully break twice outside the window. It was not very loud and seemed to come from a great distance.

Surprisingly, Thuram did not see any lightning streaking across the sky. Common sense would dictate that lightning should precede thunder.

Suddenly, the expression on Iron Axe's face finally changed.

"Listen, thunder is coming."

Chapter 746: A Burning Night

The light from the explosion flashed like a firefly in the night.

Van'er raised his telescope and looked toward the oasis.

The burning torches became the best way to find their targets. The torches became more intensive the closer they were to Iron Sand City. Thousands of flashing flames clearly illuminated the camp of Sand Nation, which was the main target of the artillery battalion.

After a while, the sound of a large explosion came from the depths of the oasis.

"The landing locations seem a bit unorganized," muttered Cat's Claw who was also observing.

"That's the best we could do. You know, it's difficult to set the cannon on the sand so we can only use the first shots as tests." Jop replied while loading the shell into the barrel for the next firing.

"Anyway, try to shoot further. If the shell falls on the head of His Excellency Iron Axe, we'll be done for."

"Rest assured. The tavern is far from the camp. If we hit it by mistake, the shooting manuals written by the sages should be rewritten." Rodney tightened the firing rope and shouted, "Ready!"

"Fire!" Van'er nodded.

The two Longsong Cannons fired again with deafening roars. Flames that escaped from the muzzle briefly lit up the ground in front of them and raised enough dust to hit them on their faces, causing the crowd to shut their eyes.

The small oasis was not really a town. It was merely a fortress formed by the clans outside Iron Sand City. None of the houses were made of brick and stone, and most of them were just tents of leather and cloth except some small buildings and watch towers.

Therefore, the damage from the Longsong Cannons was surprisingly good.

Van'er noticed that no matter where the shell landed, the area would be dark for a second but soon light up again. The explosion knocked over tents and torches, and then the oil of torches mixed with other flammable building material, forming more dazzling flames.

This was the first time the artillery battalion of First Army had to use the method of measuring distances and arranging artillery positions according to the firing table. The result could not be described as ideal, but fortunately, the vulnerable and flammable targets made up for this flaw. After several rounds of shooting, the camp of the Sand Nation had been lit into a large fire, while several bright flames were spreading with the help of the roaring evening wind. It was going to ignite the entire oasis. Though he was not experiencing the power of artillery first hand, Van'er could imagine exactly what sort of predicament the so-called watchdogs were now in.

Overwhelming and unavoidable, this was the Lord of War praised by His Majesty.

Praise the cannon!

Praise the large-caliber cannon!

He proudly glanced at the Gun Battalion, lying in ambush, and the machine gun squads on both sides and once again felt fortunate that he had made the right choice.

The future of warfare would be dominated by cannons. As for flintlocks... they would only be suitable for supporting the cannons or clearing the battlefield, but nothing more.

...

It was after quite a while before Thuram recovered from the earth-shattering explosions. Until now, his ears had been buzzing, as if he had been slapped in his face.

Was that the thunder that Iron Axe had mentioned?

After deep thunder and sharp howls, a watch tower not far from the tavern was suddenly engulfed by a fireball and the whole tower split into pieces within seconds. At the same time, the roar of the explosion caused his ears to lose hearing for a moment.

Through the smashed holes in the wall, he saw many tents were ignited by the splashing bonfire and then became even larger bonfires. People screamed and ran out of the fire, rolling, and struggling on the ground in an attempt to quench the flames. Unfortunately, few of them were lucky enough to do that.

Some of the sand people near the watch tower fell down unconscious. They were not fatally injured, but they could never stand up again.

Damn, this was not thunder, but heavenly fire falling into the mortal world!

Only the Heavenly Father could have such a terrible power.

Thuram thought such a violent attack would not last long, but he soon found himself to be wrong.

He heard the sound of thunder every couple of minutes which was then followed by fireballs and explosions. He also noticed that the fireballs were scattered at the very beginning, but soon concentrated on the center of the oasis. That was where the watchdogs lived. Different from the vassal clans, the watchdogs occupied the most fertile land in the oasis.

However, at the moment, it had become a hell.

A fire raged as if the sky was burning.

He looked at Iron Axe differently now.

"By the name of Three Gods... you do not have such strength!" Thuram asked with a husky and trembling voice, "Who did you submit to? Those northerners?"

"A merciful king," Iron Axe replied, "he'll bring order and safety to the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan."

"This is imposs..." He subconsciously wanted to say "impossible", but when he saw the sea of fire spreading throughout the oasis, the last syllable got caught in his throat and could not be uttered.

"Unfortunately, not all people are willing to accept such a system. The oasis feeds the Sand Nation, but at the same time imprisons their thoughts. Killing and framing came from fighting for survival. How ironic that the oasis, that should support life, is soaked with blood. As for the watchdogs, the large clans keep them in power and make our clansmen suffer in sand and drought. I have to say, that's a stupid and short-sighted thing to do."

"If these words were spoken by the northerners, I would not be surprised, but by you, Iron Axe..." Thuram shook his head painfully. "As a mixed-blood grown up in the desert, how can you be so naive? Did you forget that the oasis is limited and can't support the growing population if we don't fight for the territories? Unless Mojins are able to overpower Graycastle, we can't leave the desert. Cooperation and submission will end up in death as the northerners will never really trust us. The fall of the Black Bone and Sandstone Clans is the proof of that!"

In order to receive rich territory, these two clans, which should have the opportunity to live in Iron Sand City, chose to offer their service to Garcia, Queen of Clearwater. What did they get? It was understood that everyone was fed a strange pill and eventually turned into rotten flesh and the Queen's promise became meaningless.

"Can we never gain real trust?" Iron Axe said with a slight sigh, "I used to think so, but the evidence that I have seen tell me that some people are born to break routine."

Suddenly, Thuram heard a burst of galloping outside the tavern, which became more and more frequent. He knew that the counterattack team of the watchdogs was assembling.

They might lose the courage to fight, but their skills and horsemanship were not lost. As long as any enemies emerged near the oasis, they would go for them like bloodthirsty sandworms. When he was about to remind Iron Axe, he was grabbed by his collar and drawn to the window.

Not far away, he saw more burning torches moving toward the desert outside the oasis.

Apparently, these watchdogs picked up the attackers' scent.

However, both Iron Axe and the dark-haired Divine Lady were at ease. It seemed that they did not care about this cavalry team.

"What did I say before? Not everyone is happy to accept the new order... The watchdogs thought they can stop the thunder," the mixed-blood whispered in his ear as if he was pronouncing his fate, "But whether you accept it or not, the new order will come."

Chapter 747: The Sniper

The night was not the perfect hour to fight.

The sun and the moon both became invisible during the Months of Demons. Dismal light spilled across the heaving desert, faintly tracing the curve of sand hills. The area which light failed to penetrate was, in contrast, pitch dark.

Given the poor lighting condition, torches became necessities for either attacking or defending.

When glitters of fires emerged here and there in the oasis' direction, Danny polished his clip, slipped it into the loading port and bolted.

"Attention, enemies are coming."

"I saw them."

He first mimicked Malt's voice and then replied to himself.

In this way, he could pretend that Malt was still fighting beside him as his protector, although Malt was no longer a member of the sniper team.

Shortly after Danny had been released from his detention and sent back to the gun battalion, Brian had come to see him and brought him a brand new flintlock.

It was exactly the one he was holding right now.

Although the new flintlock did not look any different from the bolt gun used by the sniper team, he knew at once that it was a masterpiece after weighing it in the hand.

Like longswords that bore a similar looking, some of them were casually forged by blacksmiths just for training purposes; some of them, however, were splendid weapons, whose blade could bite into flesh as easily as cutting through cheese.

The metal part of the barrel gleamed, its surface as smooth as a maid's skin. The joints were all polished like a work of art. The gun was perfectly molded without any prickly feelings.

What surprised Danny most was the monocular telescope on the top. The lens was engraved with two straight, crisscrossed fine lines, the intersection of which exactly aligned with the place where a bullet should land.

Danny did not understand why the distant target, which had been blurry and tiny earlier, became clear and visible instantly when he looked through the telescope. This meant that the shooting range of the gun had, in a way, been extended. During the testing shooting session, Danny had further verified his theory. He had noticed that the new flintlock was much more accurate than an ordinary bolt gun. When there was no or little wind, he could successfully hit the humanoid target 500 meters away with a headshot at an accuracy of 90%.

When he had learned that the weapon had been specially made for him by His Majesty, Danny had almost burst into tears. Despite his misconduct, he was still given high hopes by his Majesty and was even granted the power to freely choose his shooting positions. Danny knew he had nothing to pay back the king for his benevolence but his own life.

When Brian had asked him whether he wanted to select a protector, however, Danny had declined the offer immediately.

He had his own protector already.

It was this gun.

And Malt.

Like his commander had predicted, more firelights emerged and they covered the desert like fallen stars. Before every battle, the superiors would usually disclose the operation intention and operation target to each team in detail so that soldiers would know when they should expect to see the battle end.

For example, the cannon unit would lit bonfires at their rampart and fire every seven minutes or so to entice enemies to start counterattacks, for the purpose of bleeding off strength from the watchdog clan and thereby preparing for the general attack at dawn. The lit battlement would attract enemies' attention, whereas controlling the firing rate was to avoid a fierce, swift bombard that tended to directly disperse the roving enemies.

Of course, Danny knew the artillery battalion did not have the capability to control their firing rate.

Soldiers from the artillery battalion had no idea how many resources were available for them. They were all arrogant, incompetent fighters who probably could not even transport basic equipment to the desert

had the witch named Hummingbird not helped them. Compared with those useless idiots, soldiers from the gun battalion were much more productive. Each soldier in the gun battalion was responsible for carrying both weapons and ammunition.

There were a dozen carriages in total, over half of which carried cannon and machine gun shells. One wooden box was only able to house two howitzers. If they fought in the same way as they did during the exercise, two Longsong cannons would consume all the ammunition they took with them in an hour. If the ammunition was exhausted, they would have nothing to fire.

Although Danny admitted that the exercise was magnificent, he always thought tons of gold royals were burned each time they fired. Unfortunately, too ignorant and conceited to understand that all the expenses incurred were actually borne by His Majesty's treasury, the soldiers from the artillery battalion simply viewed such remarkable power as their own. If one day His Majesty stopped financially supporting them, these soldiers would be absolutely nothing compared with the gun battalion!

Therefore, the real reason for controlling the firing rate was to reserve some ammunition for future emergencies, rather than avoid the dispersion of enemies. They probably had to wait for another one or two weeks before new recruits provided supplies and new ammunition to the oasis.

When the firelight at the very front was lured into the First Army's ambush, Danny raised his telescope.

"Norther...ly wind, relatively strong. Your target is about 700 meters away."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Danny muttered to himself, his hand on the trigger.

Considering the accuracy would be greatly affected at night, he did not position himself too far away from the battlement. Instead, he decided to shoot across the field. In this way, he would not lose sight of his enemies even if they were charging forward on their warhorses.

Sand Nation was indeed barbarians good at fighting on horseback. The dispersed firelights had gradually formed a straight line by the time they charged. The patterings of hooves drummed the ground in a chorus and gradually grew faster. Meanwhile, those warriors tossed the torches and drew out their swords. As their swords reflected no light, the roaring battlement of the artillery became the most distinctive landmark Danny could see.

Just then, numerous flickers suddenly appeared at the two sandhills flanking in the shadow.

"Tuk, tuk, tuk..."

The sharp, crisp sound of machine guns mixed with the drumming horse hooves officially marked the commencement of the battle. As there was no field artillery, heavy machine guns became the weapons with the longest shooting range. Bullets streamed out and swept over the charging warriors. The desert instantly began to thunder. Danny could hear people shrieking, cursing and yelling. Shadows seemed to move even faster in the darkness.

Danny paid them no mind.

His eyes were fixed on the enemy at the very front.

"500 meters. I got you."

It was not easy to locate his target at a moonless night. He could barely discern the figure of the charging enemy. However, the battle was not an exercise either. He did not have to shoot his head to score. A shot in any parts of the enemy's body would be enough to take him down. This applied to both the mount and the rider.

Danny pulled the trigger. The barrel slightly trembled. He was exhilarated by the smoke of gunpowder.

Danny did not see where the bullet landed, nor did he notice any spilled blood. The enemy simply died with a quiver and fell off the horse.

"This is my hunting ground," thought Danny. "This is where I should stay."

"Did you just see that, Malt?"

"Don't be distracted. Your next target is coming."

"Ah, place the matter in my hand."

Chapter 748: A New Osha Clan

As dusk deepened and the darkness seeped through clouds, both parties found it difficult to continue with the battle.

Evidently, once the landing spots of bullets and their targets were indiscernible, the shooting accuracy of the machine gun squad would drop drastically. Although the number of machine guns invested in this operation was not comparable to that in Coldwind Ridge, they could still stop the cavalymen from charging quite well. When their enemies tossed the torches, there would always be a few dozen people making their way through the barrage fire, howling while dashing toward the artillery and thereby becoming Danny's shooting targets.

On the other hand, the enemies could not tell where their real threats lay. They neither saw their companions shatter under fire nor did they know what weapon exactly stood between the two sand hills on either side.

Without a torch, the cavalymen behind did not quite know what had truly happened to their companions at the front. They could only hear the roar of cannons not far away and see the flickering lights on the sides. To them, the thundering cannons were apparently more threatening than unmanned sand hills on the sides.

Because of this, the watchdog was not crushed at once but they continuously charged forward like endless foaming tides.

For those seasoned clan warriors, they believed constant slashing and charging was the best way to dismantle enemies' wills and lower their morale. Speed represented power. No slave or mercenary

could ever defy their ceaseless attack. They believed once the defensive line, no matter how impregnable it was, was broken through by cavalry, their enemies would soon fall into chaos.

This created a perfect opportunity for Danny to prey.

It was not long before he shot the 20th enemy down.

Meanwhile, Danny also noticed a strange phenomenon: many times he took aim at an enemy at the very front, only to find that his prey had been taken by someone else.

As if someone were competing with him.

It was more than that, however.

What thrilled Danny was that this sniper hiding in the darkness appeared to be an exquisite hunter.

Because all his enemies fell to the same side.

If his competitor was facing enemies like him, the target would fall backward when being shot in the torso. If he hit the mount, then the enemy would be thrown off the horse and fell forward. Danny did not really know the mechanism behind this, but his prediction was mostly accurate.

The fact that the target fell to one side meant that the shooter was close to one of the sand hills and always shot his enemy in the torso rather than his mount.

What does that imply?

It indicated that the hunter could not only capture the darting horserider in the dismal light but could also predict where his target was heading before each firing. As the crisp winds in the desert were always variable and unforeseeable, the fact that the hunter could still maintain such an astonishing accuracy really showed that his shooting was a masterstroke.

Is there really such an excellent sniper in the army?

Is he a member of the precision shooting squad, or a person like him, a soldier from the gun battalion who was picked out by His Majesty and given a new bolt gun?

Danny could barely suppress his excitement. He sped up what he was doing.

He did not want to lose to his rival.

Especially when Malt was looking up to him.

"Only one left on your right hand, 250 meters away from the defensive line."

"He's mine now."

...

The roar of thunders finally died down in the second half of the night, but Thuram did not hear the cheers of returning warriors which he had been anticipating.

Although the watchdog was caught unprepared, based on the number of torches, there were nearly 2,000 summoned warriors who participated in the battle. No matter they had lost or won, he should

have heard something back from them by now. Nevertheless, after thundering yells and shouts gradually faded away, the night fell deadly silent, as though the 2,000 people had all been engulfed by a giant monster, both flesh and bones.

Thuram sent all the clansmen who came to rescue to put out the blazes as Iron Axe had instructed. The fires in the oasis were thus gradually quenched.

He was not sure whether he should rejoice or lament.

Watchdogs had never ceased their oppression of his clansmen. Thuram had always dreamed that they would, one day, meet some misfortunes, for example, enraging the big clan in the city or being miserably defeated by some challenger who rose abruptly. He would take delight in any woes that rested upon them.

But he had not expected that this new challenger was Iron Axe.

It seemed that Iron Axe also planned to involve him in this tumult of battle that aimed to select the strongest clan.

Perchance he should persuade Iron Axe to first hold the bloodstained place before considering to take the next step. It was true that the golden-eyed Divine Lady coming with him was powerful, but... the one from Raging Flare clan was not so easy to deal with as well. As Raging Flare clan was the biggest clan among all, they could decide how the duel should take place. If they chose to have a one-on-one hand-to-hand combat, Thuram did not think the Iron Axes' Divine Lady would win.

A holy duel was said to be the most open and fairest competition, it was actually, however, more a competition between the two clans. Each of the clan could not only set up traps for the other prior to the duel, but they could also frame their rivals in the ring as well. Skillful warriors was definitely not a guarantee of an eventual victory. For that, the exile of Osha clan had provided the best example.

What bewildered him the most, nonetheless, was why the King of Graycastle had a sudden interest in the desert.

To northerners, the desert always represented barbarism and primitiveness. Northerners forbade Sand Nation to set foot in their kingdoms. They did not want to meddle in disputes among clans either. Only tradesmen traveled back and forth between the desert and kingdoms, and they usually traded slaves only.

Plus, what did Iron Axe mean by "order and oasis"? It was rumored that only Three Gods Emissary could cultivate an oasis in the desert and stop storms. Another saying was that the Southernmost Region had originally been a verdant land covered with green grass and trees, interspersed with singing brooks. It was the death of the emissary that made the land parched and wasted like the one today. When Three Gods dispatched their new emissary, the Southernmost Region would once again become prosperous. However, it was simply a legend shrouded in mystery. Nobody had ever made this happen; otherwise, Sand Nation would not fight for water and food all the year round.

While he was waiting in anxiety, dawn finally broke in the east with a dagger of daylight streaking the sky.

Then Thuram heard a distant, strange roar of horns. The sound was not as dull and low as the blare of an ox horn, but it was sharper and crisper like a repetitive ticking...

Shortly afterward, a peculiar army emerged at the border of the oasis.

The soldiers lined up horizontally and approached the bloodstained place with an irresistible force. They then started a bitter battle with the watchdog. It might not be that fierce though, for a group of clan warriors, who dashed forward with swords, all fell to the ground after a series of "crack, crack" of gunshots. The rest of the warriors dispersed immediately, paying their moaning companions no mind. After the soldiers entered the oasis, they quickly occupied the several watchtowers and encircled the tavern.

When that blue-gray haired, dark-skinned lady came into the room, Thuram knew he had no other choices. Although he had not seen her for seven or eight years, he could still perceive some resemblances between her and her mother.

Thuram went to his knee in front of Drow Silvermoon, his forehead touching the cold floor. He said in a raucous voice, "I swear to Three Gods that my clansmen and I will be at your service. From now on, you'll be the chief of the new Osha clan."

Chapter 749: Osha's Present

The moment Rubaka Bloodwhip got out of the bed, he heard the news about the change in the ownership of the small oasis in the northwest.

"Really?" His brows furrowed. Although he had also seen glimmers of fires in the oasis, he had not expected Howling clan would be obliterated over one night. He tried to think of a newly established clan that possessed such impressive power but could not name any.

Rubaka patted his concubine lying next to him to usher her out. After the woman wrapped herself up in a blanket and withdrew, he turned to his men and said, "Fill me in."

"Yes, Mr. Chief. According to the people who fled from the oasis, it appeared the fire wasn't caused by the challenger lurking there but was actually a fire from heaven induced by the Father God..."

"Nonsense!" Rubaka coughed out a spittle. "Those cravens just blame everything on Three Gods when they come across trouble. I'm going to hang all of them above the gate of Iron Sand City!"

The clansman replied hesitatively, "but... I sent someone to the camps at the small oasis this morning. What they found seemed to be consistent with the description... There're many holes as black as pitch in the ground. Corpses and fragments of building materials are everywhere. It doesn't look like a simple arson."

"Fragments?"

"Yes. Men were torn to pieces as if a huge sandworm or burrow scorpion had plodded on the campground." The clansman was careful to choose his words. "Most people who stayed in the camp died miserably, while those who went to seek pleasure outside fought back. Yet they were vanquished even before they saw their rivals."

"In other words, those fools were ambushed and all ran for life without even approaching their enemies? So what now? Haven't they even figured out which clan took the small oasis?" Rubaka started to suspect whether he had been too generous to the watchdog. He had made a great effort in persuading them to work for him, but their performance was indeed disappointing. Could it be possible that they had lived too comfortably for so long that meat and mead had made them more drunken and lecherous than he desired them to be?

"My men are investigating and we should soon receive some information from them." The clansman hesitated for a moment and then said, "I heard some refugees say that they've seen many northerners."

"Northerners..."

Hearing this, Rubaka began to take this matter seriously.

He walked to the window, naked, and looked in the northwestern direction. The fires had been extinguished long before. He could only see tendrils of dark smoke rise into the air at a distance.

Although Howling clan was drawn over to his side and served as his watchdog through the joint effort of both Ironwhip and Bonegrinding clans, he did not care much about their survival. After Rubaka settled down in Iron Sand City, he came to understand that the challenger system was actually more a safeguard established by the six clans than a qualification test.

A holy duel was simply a small fight, whereas battles provoked by challengers for the ownership of the small oasis could be considered as a full-fledged war. It was common for two small clans to drown each other in blood, for the oasis was a fat piece of meat that every clan who wished to strengthen their power drooled for, even if they did not plan to set foot in Iron Sand City. No matter which party eventually won, the victory usually cost dear and both parties would need a considerably long time to recover.

During the time when challengers were recuperating, big clans could easily convince those small clans to work for them as watchdogs through either bribing or duress. It was particularly easy to persuade those who believed that the compromising was just temporary and that they would sooner or later challenge the big clan to another duel. Practically, in the end, none of them managed to toll the holy bell of Iron Sand City.

Because by that time, new challengers would emerge and struck out the old watchdog.

In this way, big clans were able to remain in a relatively secure position without being consumed by the war.

Now, since Ironwhip had risen to the fourth place on the ranking, it was unlikely that challengers would seek him as their rival even if they planned to start an immediate duel. That was why the change of the ownership of the small oasis had not really alarmed him.

But the appearance of northerners had changed the whole story.

Queen of Clearwater, for instance, had created quite a big commotion in Iron Sand City. In fact, many people yearned for the evergreen land in the north and were even willing to reduce to slaves or sellswords to live there. The departure of two potential challengers had once left the small oasis

unmanned and thus attracted many people who wanted to rule this land to start Divine Challenges. It was the chaos created by this temporary disorder that made Rubaka's clan the fourth biggest one.

What game are they playing this time?

"Keep an eye on those people and let me know what's exactly happened." Rubaka turned around and instructed his clansman. "Which city are those northerners from? How many of them? What weapon do they carry? What do they want? I want to know all of these!"

"Yes, Mr. Chief!"

Perhaps it was time for him to discuss the matter with the other big clans.

The rule in the Southernmost Region was that no outsiders should meddle in their affairs!

...

Nonetheless, Rubaka Bloodwhip received a piece of incredible news in the afternoon.

"What did you say? Osha clan?"

"That's what they say. The banners in the oasis have all been replaced with ones with the sigil of Osha clan. I also saw Princess Osha who was traded as a slave. She's now a Divine Lady and is calling on her clansmen. There're a lot of people responding to her call!"

How... can this be possible?

Rubaka was not ignorant of the kingdoms in the north. A Divine Lady was viewed as a representation of evil in Graycastle. Their social status was even lower than that of a slave girl in Sand Nation, not to mention a Divine Lady slave. He wondered how she won the support from northerners and returned to the Southernmost Region to exact her revenge along with her northern followers?

Rubaka smelled sheer folly but was also a little rattled by the news.

Mojins had been forced to confine their activities to the desert up until now not because they preferred the desert as their dwellings, but because they did not have the capability to confront Graycastle. If Osha clan supported by northerners planned to wage a war against Iron Sand City, all the clans would come together to fight back. If they, however, only intended to weed him out, would the other clans help Ironwhip?

The answer was there.

Damn!

Rubaka smashed the wine glass to the ground and stomped on it. It instantly broke to pieces.

"If you want to avenge your father's death through a holy duel, then I'm right here waiting for you!" Rubaka said within himself insolently. "Northerners may have finer weapons and they might outnumber us, but when it comes to a duel, Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan are the most valiant warriors! I'll let you know the taste of despair!"

Just at that moment, another clansman entered the hall. "Mr. Chief, Osha clan has sent a present to us."

"What?" Rubaka felt his temples throbbing. "A present?"

"Yes. It's right in the yard."

"Take me there." He ground his teeth.

...

It was a huge wooden box, as tall as a grown person, its width half of its height. The box, which was assembled by a few ordinary planks, with an iron nail staked at each corner, looked nothing unusual from the outside.

"Where's the courier?" Rubaka asked.

"Already gone."

"How many of them?"

"Well... only one."

"Only one?" He raised his brows and kicked the box. The box rolled over on the ground, producing loud clanks and clinks. Obviously, there was something in it. Yet based on the weight of the box, the stuff seemed to be pretty light as though the box were hollow.

Rubaka wondered if there were torn limbs and flesh, or human skins in it. Apart from a bluff, he could not think of anything else.

Rubaka commanded coolly, "Take it to Stone Castle. Let's see what game they're playing."

Chapter 750: An Unexpected Thunder

After his men opened the wooden box, he saw the "present" in it.

It was a coffin.

A finely crafted coffin.

The coffin was hemmed with luxurious gold foil, decorated with beautiful lacquer paintings. The pattern on the coffin's lid was a black short whip, which was exactly Iron Whip clan's sigil.

Rubaka Bloodwhip stiffened before breaking into a half-sneering smile

"That's it? I thought they would give me something scarier than this." He shook his head. "I was expecting a head, ears or a man's skins... which is how Iron Sand City normally handles this kind of matter. A coffin? The Southernmost Region doesn't need such a frivolous thing!"

The dead here would all be dumped in the desert, buried in scorching sands and eventually reduce to skeletons. No matter how prominent and distinguished he once had been, death made them all equal.

Only people from the north needed those awkward wooden cases.

They seemed to like locking themselves up in this cage of eternity after their deaths.

"The whore of Osha thought this would frighten me?" Rubaka breathed heavily. "Perchance she's forgotten how a Sand Nation usually makes threats after being a slave in Graycastle for so long."

Nonetheless, the humiliation made Rubaka's blood all rush to his head.

"Get me the ax!" he yelled.

Soon a clansman entered with a huge cast-iron ax on his shoulder. The hilt of the ax was nearly of a man's height, its glinty black blade as big as a man's skull. Although Rubaka was the chief of Iron Whip clan, his favorite weapon was this giant, heavy battle ax. It worked perfectly for slaughtering desert beasts and beheading his challengers.

Nothing could possibly compete with the absolute power of this ax. Once being hit, the person would die instantly at a single blow even if he was wearing an armor which northerners typically wore.

The ax had also tasted the blood of Osha clan, including women's and children's.

Rubaka had forgotten to tell Drow Silvermoon that those exiles did not make their trip to Endless Cape because he had taken a detour aforetime and arrived there ahead of them. They had all been slashed in the desert.

He did not fear retribution but simply enjoyed killing.

A coffin?

Get lost.

Rubaka coughed out a spittle and howled. He held up the battle ax, aimed at the coffin lid patterned with the iron whip and then gave it a full swing...

"Crack!"

A number of sparks flew off the blade as if it had hit something hard like iron or stones.

The coffin did not split in half as he had anticipated. From the vibration of the hilt, Rubaka knew the pretty wooden case was actually stuffed with items rather than being empty!

But it was too late.

Following the sparks, a streak of dazzling light came out of the coffin and soon lit up the entire hall. The lit area expanded immediately as the light spread and flared out.

Rubaka, however, did not see any of these.

When the light flitted across him, his eyes and tongue were torn to bits by the strength of rapidly expanded airwaves. Subsequently, his head, limbs and inner organs were all torn apart...

All the residents in Iron Sand City witnessed an incredible scene when they heard a ground-shaking bang.

Flames and smoke escaped from the bottom of the stonewatch of Rising Sun like raging underground fire; the garden wall was practically wiped out by a giant visible hand. The whole stone castle sprang up abruptly before it collapsed in the heavy smoke.

First, the wall sank, followed by the pillars and the roof. As more stones fell off, more smoke erupted from the ground. In the end, a column of smoke rose out of the crumpled stone castle, soared into the clouds, and then finally blended with the overcast sky.

"A Tower of Babel" seemed to be suddenly erected in Iron Sand City

...

Thuram in Oasis Tavern also witnessed the explosion. He did not understand what the story Iron Axe had told him earlier exactly referred to until a moment ago.

The coffin filled with snow powder, the weight reduced by the Divine Lady, the flint closely attached to the lid and the lanyard connected to the ceiling... All of these would trigger a roar of thunders no matter how the coffin was opened. Whether by force or through a regular procedure, the explosion was inevitable. Although he had no knowledge of snow powder or lanyards, he understood what a thunderbolt was.

Thuram could imagine how frightful this unexpected thunder was, for the blast, although distant, could be heard somewhere several miles away, and the column of smoke could be even detected at the bloodstained place.

If the coffin was truly the cause of such a horrific scene in Iron Sand City, it was very likely that the chief of Iron Whip clan had already died.

The only thing that Thuram had failed to predict was that Iron Axe actually took action on Iron Whip clan, the fourth strongest clan, prior to the duel, not to mention the vengeance was inflicted in such a blatant way.

"You..." He stared at Iron Axe, who remained unperturbed, in astonishment, failing to articulate his sentence.

Iron Axe explained nonchalantly, "Rubaka Bloodwhip profaned the holy duel back then. He also failed Three Gods' expectation. How can I have a fair fight with a guy who has been disqualified at the Land of Fire? Rubaka and his clan are all cowards. I've never treated them as my rivals since the beginning."

"But... Ironwhip is essentially a big clan..."

Iron Axe shook his head. "That's exactly why I let them die in this way rather than allow them to die with honor in a ring. Plus, Osha clan won't violate Three Gods' rules. Once our rivals yield, we'll lay down our weapons and exempt them from death." He paused for a second and then said, "Think about it. Were you the chief of Ironwhip, what would you do when you're informed that Osha clan has come back?"

Thuram instantly understood what Iron Axe meant.

It was true that a person who had once broken the rule was very likely to commit wrongdoings again. A person who disobeyed Three Gods' rules would cause incessant trouble. Even if he attempted to reverse his defeat eight years ago through a holy duel, he would probably keep harassing and framing his rivals before and after the fight. It would be better to completely destroy him than constantly having your eyes peeled.

"But... if Rubaka didn't open the coffin or destroy it, your plan would have failed." Thuram blurted out his last question.

"The chief of Ironwhip were in nature aggressive and savage. He liked to destroy and slaughter. It's as easy to read his mind as to read a monkey's." Iron Axes curled up his lips into a smile. "Plus, the coffin full of snow powder was just the very beginning of my plan, an appetizer, so to speak. Even if Rubaka luckily survived, there was much more awaiting him... Now it seems that Three Gods won't protect a traitor."

Thuram shuddered at these words.

He had sworn to Three Gods when he had pledged fealty to Drow Silvermoon and the new Osha clan.

Iron Axe's last sentence was also a warning to him.

"Now we can crack into the business." The mixed-blood patted Thuram on his shoulder, utterly unabashed. "The reason I've picked you is that you know everything about Iron Sand City. People in the oasis told me that there's nothing about the desert that you don't know."

"It's simply because I've been living here for a long time and heard a lot of stories." After witnessing how the watchdog had been defeated overnight and how the explosion had brought upon Iron Whip clan a swift destruction, Thuram showed more respect to Iron Axe, Princess Osha and Graycastle that supported them. "I'll tell you everything that I know in detail."

Iron Axe inclined his head. "Very good. If you want to win the holy duel, you have to first thoroughly investigate your rivals... Let's begin with warriors from various clans and their Divine Ladies."