

Witch 761

Chapter 761: Holy Duel

Weapon shelves were placed on both sides of the platform for the convenience of both dueling parties.

Most common weapons were available, including knives, swords, and whips. For the sake of fairness, neither party was allowed to bring their own weapons. After all, a large clan would definitely be capable of forging superior blades, while a poorer challenger would have to rely on their crude equipment. This disparity would cause the duel to lose its meaning.

However, Thuram knew full well that there were ways around the rules. As a matter of fact, Iron Whip had defeated Osha previously by covertly swapping the provided whips for Blackwater versions. Although the arbiter punished the weapons supervisor later on, the result had already been finalized, and no one would contest a large clan on behalf of a fallen clan.

However, it was completely unexpected that Osha would rise from the verge of death.

Even the strongest of clans now felt pressured by its ferocious might.

This was the first time Thuram had seen the chief of Wildflame look on at the new challenger with a solemn look in his eyes.

"Is every warrior limited to one weapon?" Ashes suddenly asked.

"Err... there's no such rule." Thuram regained his attention. "You're allowed to carry as many as you wish."

"Great, I'm ready." She attached two scimitars around her waist, weighed a large sledgehammer in her hands, and further took up a wooden shield. "These should be enough to last me until the end."

Thuram gulped in amazement. Although he long knew that this black-haired and golden-eyed Divine Lady was extremely powerful, it now seemed like he had underestimated her. Most people required many years of training to use the double-handed sledgehammer, yet she was able to wield it with a single hand and with the ease of a small rapier. She would certainly be a nightmare opponent for any enemy. Clearly, she did not exert her full strength during the conflict in the tavern, or the entire place would have been demolished.

"I'm ready too." Andrea casually chose a short bow and deliberately reduced the number of arrows in the quiver to just 22.

"Get on the platform," Iron Axe muttered.

"Wait!" Thuram froze in surprise. "Just four of you?" He took a glance at the Graycastle warriors behind him. The 50-strong contingent was scattered around the place with their backs against the weapon shelves. They peered vigilantly at the onlooking crowd, with no intention of choosing weapons.

"There's no rule on the number of participants either, right?" Ashes coolly replied. "Four's enough."

According to the rules, the number of participating warriors from each side should be between 15 to 30 people. The upper limit was set out of consideration of the space on the platform. However, there was also a stipulation that the number of participants from the challenger clan should not exceed that of the challenged clan. That meant that if the opponent sent out 15 warriors, Osha would be allowed to send out no more than 15 warriors too.

This stipulation was borne out of a harsh truth: no matter which side won or lost, heavy casualties were expected, and it was common for more than half of the participants to be either critically or fatally wounded. There had certainly been duels in which only one warrior was left standing. Thus, the greater the number of participants, the heavier the losses of each participating clan would be. It was uncommon for one side to send out 30 or more warriors, unless the challenged clan knew beforehand that the challenger clan would not be able to send out an equivalent number of warriors, and might hence use this method to obtain a numerical advantage.

Cut Bone's decision to send out 22 men certainly took into account that even if they lost the duel, there would not be too much impact on their clan's strength. It would not be the end of the world if they lost control of Iron Sand City to the challenger. As long as they still had brave warriors in their ranks, they would have the chance to mount a comeback in the future.

For Osha, the right thing to do would be to send out an equivalent number of participants. Although the Greycastle warriors looked short and frail, and did not seem brave enough for a battle like this, Osha would still have a huge advantage with Ashes around. Her innate strength, while unaffected by God's Stones of Retaliation, would be sufficient to determine the duel's outcome.

But the scenario would be completely different with just four people. The Divine Ladies were certainly adept at leading and helping people to survive in the harsh conditions of the desert, and were rightly revered for that, but that did not mean they were equally suitable for combat. Furthermore, the opponents were more than likely to equip God's Stones of Retaliation, which would easily suppress the Divine Ladies' abilities, such that they might even become weaker than regular people.

If Drow Silvermoon and Andrea lost their combat abilities, only Iron Axe and Ashes would be left to fight. No matter how strong the latter was, it would be impossible for her to handle being surrounded by 20 or so opponents who were each willing to sacrifice their lives in order to secure the victory. With only two hands and two legs, she would certainly not be able to parry every blow.

Thuram had thought all these would be common knowledge to Iron Axe since he had participated in holy duels before. Having not been asked to attend the strategy discussion, Thuram did not pay much attention to their decisions, in line with the principle that "he who asks less lives longer". Yet, he never expected the latter to be this negligent.

He stood aghast as the four of them walked on to the platform nonchalantly. He shuddered involuntarily and cold sweat began to pour from his forehead. Yet, at the same time, he felt like he was standing naked in a frosty desert... as though the fire "trees" surrounding the place were no longer able to shelter him from the cruel winds.

He should know that he's a member of the Osha clan!

If he fails, would I still have a place in the small oasis? I'll probably not even be able to remain in Southernmost Region!"

"If I'd known, I would have thrown all the clanspeople to him. Then he won't dare to take this sort of risk."

The appearance of the four people on the platform shook the crowd greatly too. Although sending on fewer participants than the opponent was a symbol of confidence and courage, in this case pitching four people against 22 battle-hardened tribal warriors was virtually suicide.

The hissing noises dissipated at once.

The eyes of every onlooker widened, and the apathy on their faces turned into astonishment and dismay.

"Do you confirm that the Osha party shall consist of just the four of you?" In view of such a strange sight, the chief of Wildflame felt compelled to inquire.

"That's right." Ashes grinned slightly. "Let's get on with it. By the way, have you guys written your wills?"

The audience burst into an uproar.

"Who's this lass?"

"She must be delusional!"

"Surely even Divine Ladies won't be able to resist the God's Stone Arrows?"

"Wait, I've a feeling she's serious..."

"I feel the same. She seems to have as much blood on her hands as me."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm a warrior and know this from experience. My heartbeat also says that she's absolutely frightening."

"But there're just four of them!"

"We'll know the answer shortly."

In a matter of minutes, the situation on the sidelines had changed greatly. Everyone's attention was fixed on the platform, and the initial apathy was replaced with a warm excitement. Even if it was a suicide mission, the courage of the Osha party was praiseworthy. And the Ironsand people were never reluctant to show respect for those who were truly brave.

Upon hearing the rumblings from the audience, Thuram began to hesitate. "Are they really confident of victory in spite of the huge numerical disadvantage?"

As a flurry of confused thoughts ran through his mind, the arbiter rang a gong that was hung at one corner of the platform.

"Without further ado, I shall announce that the holy duel between the challenging Osha clan and the challenged Cut Bone clan begins... now!"

Chapter 762: Music, Rapid Fire, and Strength!

Once the announcement was made, the Cut Bone warriors immediately drew their weapons, and without performing the slightest of probes, they encircled the four opponents from both flanks.

No matter how well-thought-out Osha's plan was, they were but four people.

It was impossible for them to control even their own half of the arena. When the 22 warriors completed the encirclement, the Osha party would face attacks from all directions.

These warriors lived to duel, and thus had no apprehension toward a life-and-death battle. From the moment they stepped on the platform, they had already dedicated their lives to the Three Gods.

This was not only a contention for power, but also a fight to delight the gods.

Suddenly, they heard a sad and mellow singing voice.

Drow Silvermoon's song swiftly drowned out the blusters from the underground fire and the Styx River.

The melody was ethereal and smooth, and sounded as if it came from the distant horizon. Deep feelings of loss, suffering and grief were embedded in the song, such that anyone who heard it could not help bursting into tears.

This made the Cut Bone warriors pause their footsteps.

"No... stop that!"

"What... are you doing?"

"Stop it! You're blaspheming this holy place!"

"Heretic!"

"I'll kill you!"

The onlookers' expressions changed dramatically. Some pointed at the Cut Bone clan and berated them, while others hid their faces and cried as if they had encountered a sorrowful incident.

Thuram could not believe what he was about to see.

The Cut Bone warriors turned with murderous intent towards their own clanspeople. In a flash, the audience stand was covered in fresh and boiling blood as the warriors slashed at the abdomens of their kin. Heads rolled one after another onto the platform, permanently seized in an expression of consternation and disbelief. The accompanying sorrowful melody seemed to record and narrate this horrifying massacre.

It lasted only for a brief moment.

When he blinked his eyes again, the scene he had just witnessed disappeared without a trace. The 22 warriors were still lurching forward, albeit with much slower footsteps than before.

Their sluggishness could not be helped. Their clanspeople were supposed to be their greatest source of strength, support and spiritual sustenance. They lived and died for their clan and its quest for power, while their people cheered them on as heroes. Unfortunately, it was all messed up now. The cries and curses of their clanspeople made them feel highly uncertain of what had just happened, while even the other clans which supported them now glowered at the warriors as if they had done something unforgivable.

Warriors are never fazed no matter how powerful an enemy is, but they can't disregard rebukes from their own people.

Could this be the Osha princess' ability?

"But... how?" Although Thuram had seen mind control abilities before, such as that of Kabala of Sandstone Clan, he had never seen or heard of these abilities being used at a range exceeding ten footsteps! He touched the God's Stone of Retaliation that he wore on his neck and glanced at his new owner. Drow Silvermoon was visibly standing at a distance far greater than ten footsteps from the audience stand. "Was it really her singing voice which compelled those people who didn't adorn a God's Stone to cry bitterly?"

He believed that the Cut Bone warriors probably held the same doubt.

And in a duel, doubts were fatal.

Everything happened in a split second.

The instant they slowed their footsteps, Andrea seized the initiative.

Without using the short bow she carried on her back, she flung an arrow at each of the four nearest enemy duelists.

Perhaps because they were affected by what was happening outside the platform, or because they lowered their guard as they saw that the opponent was not holding a bow, they took no responsive action. By the time they saw the arrows flying straight at them, it was too late to evade.

The handful of arrows traveled as powerfully as the hardest shots a bow could make!

Each arrow penetrated its target slightly below their right clavicle and wedged in their bones. This caused their dominant hands to lose all energy and become unable to wield weapons. The four warriors thereby became entirely incapable of battle.

This created a gap in the encirclement.

The song which reverberated on the platform suddenly changed from sorrowful to passionate and high-pitched. Intense drum-beating sounds seemed to throb on every listener's heart and inspired them.

Ashes' figure was like a black shadow, which once again attested to her inexplicable strength. She was visibly carrying a sledgehammer and a shield, yet her footsteps were so light that she seemed to be drifting. Her left hand was used for parrying while her right hand wielded her weapon. Nobody was able to guard against her strikes. Instead of smashing her opponents with powerful blows, she held the sledgehammer horizontally and dashed in all directions around the platform, and this way could subdue six or seven people in no time.

The numerically-superior Cut Bone warriors now found themselves in a dilemma.

If they attempted to continue flanking the Osha party from both sides, they would struggle to parry Andrea's arrows, and moreover would have to find a way to get around Ashes and mend the gap. Even if they held up their shields, the arrows, which seemed to have eyes on them, could still puncture their legs. The Magic Stone arrows which they could fire amidst their panic would barely even threaten the opponent, and when the God's Stones fell on the floor, Iron Axe, who served a defensive role, would simply step and crush these expensive playthings that were worth dozens of gold royals each!

Yet, if they decided to abandon the encirclement, their numerical advantage would become useless.

"Everyone, close up to me!"

Perhaps seeing that their initial plan was no longer viable, one of the warriors gave a loud cry for the dozen or so standing men to gather together. At this point of the duel, it was clear to everyone that, despite Ashes' cocky proclamation at the start, not a single participant had died.

If she truly intended to kill them, none of them would be able to resist her hammer blows.

Every warrior was a precious asset of his clan. Thus Ashes' method garnered the respect of the onlooking clans, including the duelists of the Cut Bone clan themselves. While they were not afraid to sacrifice themselves for the purpose of the holy duel, it had to be a meaningful death, instead of simply perishing blindly. Mother Earth was not a bloodthirsty deity. Though she was fond of courage and strength, she would not wish to see needless deaths.

The warriors sheathed their weapons and lined up in a row. They each stretched both hands in front of them such that their intentions could not be clearer.

"Humph."

Ashes laughed easily and placed down her shield. Subsequently, she dashed directly towards them while raising up the sledgehammer horizontally.

The sledgehammer collided powerfully against the wall of men.

"Ow!"

"Don't fall back!"

"Hold on!"

Some shouts were heard from the audience stand, but neither clan's name was mentioned. It was as if at this stage, nobody cared who won or lost as long as they could witness a brave and magnificent contest. Those who were crying only a moment ago now clenched their fists and stared at the center of the platform. For some reason, Thuram did not feel that anything was strange - the drum beats continually grew more intense, as if calling for the audience to move forward courageously. Every listener was now in such a highly excited mood that they felt themselves to be a participant in the duel instead of an onlooker!

Ashes stretched her upper body into a long and slanted line and bent her legs, before she engaged in a physical standoff with the Cut Bone warriors. Her arm muscles formed a perfect arc, such that they were perhaps the best visual depiction of strength with beauty.

But of course, this was not a duel between one person and an entire clan.

Once Iron Axe, Andrea, and Drow joined in the scrimmage, the stalemate was broken.

The four of them slowly pushed their opponents towards the edge of the platform. Every step was greeted with shouts from the audience. Thuram could not resist joining in the clamor and waving of arms.

After a period of crescendo, the melody finally reached its climax.

The advancing footsteps became synchronized with the drum beats. At this point, the warriors had no energy left. The Osha quartet roared in chorus and pushed their opponents off the platform!

The music abruptly stopped as this happened. Yet, the stirring melody continued to reverberate non-stop in everyone's ears, and would not dissipate for a long time...

"The winner is the Osha clan!"

Chapter 763: The Female Lycanthrope

As Guelz Burnflame approached the training hall, he could hear a thumping noise from its interior. There seemed to be a rather intense activity going on, as if a heavy and blunt instrument was repeatedly hitting against a sandbag.

"Chief!"

The guard at the door lowered his head and bowed.

"Is that Lorgar practicing inside?" Guelz pointed towards the ajar gate.

"Yes, she came here early in the morning, and said not to disturb her."

"I'll have a look."

"But Chief..."

"What?" He cast a glance at the guard.

"Nothing, you may enter." The guard shuddered slightly.

"Seems like my daughter is becoming more and more dignified." Guelz did not feel the least bit disgruntled by the guard's obstruction and instead raised his eyebrows with interest. The way things were going, the Raging Flare clan would have a new successor when he could no longer climb on to the Burning Stage.

He opened the door to a training hall which was assembled from thousands of leather pieces, hemp ropes and wooden poles. In Iron Sand City, only the Chief himself, who owned the largest Stone Castle around, could build an indoor training ground like this.

The hall was not paved with dirt or stone, but fine yellow sand instead. Thus, it felt like one was walking in the desert. The sand was fine and small but not soft, and many sharp objects were concealed in it. These were often broken teeth or weapon fragments left behind by the trainers. There was also a considerable amount of blood that seeped through, which therefore caused a portion of the sand to turn dark red.

Guelz' grandfather once said that if all of the yellow sand was dyed red, Wildflame would forever occupy the position of the strongest clan and remain peerless in the Southernmost Region. This was because he had considered that if the clan was ever defeated, they would have to vacate this Stone Castle, and as a result, the overhead leather tentage, as well as all of the yellow sand, would have to be brought away. Even if they could not rebuild a training hall like this, at least they would not need to dye the sand again when they retook the first position.

A row of metal bars was erected on one end of the training hall. His daughter was here barefooted, with her pants and sleeves rolled up. She repeatedly threw heavy punches at the hanging sandbags. Guelz had no doubt that if these punches were thrown on a person's body, the viscera would be split into pieces.

"Hmm, excited after seeing the Osha clan's performance?" He smiled at her.

Lorgar turned her body and performed an aerial kick at a rebounded sandbag. Her slender legs moved as quick as lightning and sent the sandbag, which was as tall as a person, flying. The hemp rope holding the sandbag was finally overwhelmed, and snapped halfway through the violent swaying. The sandbag spun through the air and fell heavily on the floor, causing the interior sand to spill out.

"Hoo..." She exhaled loudly, causing her bestialized hands to return to normal. "You don't have to tell everyone, Papa. You already know what I'm thinking."

"You admire that Divine Lady called Ashes, right?" Guelz laughed heartily. "After all, in one-to-one combat, it's hard to find you a suitable opponent from this city."

Lorgar puckered her mouth. "Unfortunately, they've just won the right to enter Iron Sand City, and there's unlikely to be another contest for some time. Even if we issue them a challenge invitation, they'll probably decline."

"Of course. As the newly-promoted clan, they'll have many trifles to sort out in order to gain a foothold in this city. Perhaps there'll be a new challenger during the next spring. Nobody would want to waste their energy at this time."

"And that's why I can only hang out with these sandbags for now." Lorgar sighed. "Did you come to see me just to say this?"

"You would rather hang out with these sandbags than talk to Papa?"

"Err... that's not the case." She shook her ears and lowered them as if to admit her mistake.

"Ahem, watch your expression." Guelz controlled the urge to stroke his daughter's soft and fluffy ears, and instead issued her a solemn reminder. No matter how cute she looked, it was not befitting of a future clan leader to reveal such an expression. She should remain serious at all times, because this was the only way that her subordinates would revere and obey her.

"Oh." Lorgar immediately straightened her ears and replied seriously.

Guelz gave a nod of satisfaction. Ever since his daughter had awakened as a Divine Lady, she increasingly enjoyed fighting, while her strength and ability consistently improved. From the Mojins' perspective, there was nothing wrong with these. However, as she grew older, the abilities gifted to her by the Three Gods were beginning to show signs of sequela. At first, Lorgar looked just like a regular person, except that she would transform into a large desert wolf when she used her abilities. After many fights, she mastered the technique of transforming a single limb, and thus had an assured means of controlling the God's Stone of Retaliation. As the effective range of the God's Stone was only two to three steps, she was able to bestialize her arm by keeping a distance away from the stone. The force which her arm could then exert was too great for any normal person to resist.

She thereby became unbeatable in a duel. The clan's warrior contingent, which had suffered a severe loss of personnel through the process of defending the first position and was showing signs of instability, became rejuvenated and stronger than ever before when she joined. Nobody had dared to challenge Wildflame's position for five years now. But, after many years of practices and battles, a section of Lorgar's body had permanently become wolf-like, such as her pointy ears and a half-visible tail. These did not revert to normal even when she withdrew her abilities.

Therefore, at present, Lorgar was a half-human, half-wolf monster.

As could be imagined, she would never be able to live the life of a proper Divine Lady. No charming warrior would ever be attracted by her body and looks, while Lorgar herself was not fond of those who were too unqualified.

Perhaps only her dear father did not mind whether she was a human or a beast.

Thus, she set her heart upon becoming the chief of Wildflame. Only by standing in the position which everyone had to look up to could she silence the questions about her.

"What do you think about the holy duel?"

"It looked exhilarating, but in truth, it was just a trick by Osha's chief, Drow Silvermoon. Aside from Ashes, there was nothing impressive." Lorgar wagged her tail.

"I must say, this tactic was brilliant indeed. She used her ability to bring the audience into the duel while steering clear of the restrictions, and completely controlled the direction of the duel." Guelz remarked, stroking his beard. "Not one person died to determine the outcome of the duel. I'd never seen something like this for many years. I believe that when the Cut Bone clan looks back on what happened, they won't hate Osha for it."

"This type of trick can only be used once," Lorgar retorted disapprovingly. "I'm willing to bet that in upcoming duels, the audience will start to adorn God's Stone of Retaliation as well. Although Osha's methods may have won their opponent's respect, it may backfire one day. You can't fill your stomach

with respect. Who knows, maybe their first challenger will be a resurgent Cut Bone clan after a short period of recovery."

Guelz patted his daughter's shoulders relievedly. That she was able to notice these things, and place the clan's interest at the top of her considerations, were signs that she had the makings of a chief. Although she was keen on a well-matched and entertaining contest, she would not deliberately look for such opportunities and thereby ignore threats to the clan.

Just then, the guard who was keeping watch outside the training hall walked hurriedly up to the duo. After saluting, he reported, "Chief, I've just heard the news that the Osha clan has issued another request for a holy duel!"

"What?" Guelz was taken back and his face changed color. It had, after all, only been a day since they gained entrance into Iron Sand City. "To who?"

"The fourth-placed Sandstorm clan."

"Aren't they moving into Iron Sand City from the small oasis?"

"No. I've even heard that they rejected Cut Bone clan's arrangements to move out."

Crazy, what are these people thinking? Was it not their intention to move into Iron Sand City?

"Looks like we were wrong." Lorgar had remained silent for some time before she laughed softly. "Perhaps, a duel with Ashes isn't as unlikely as I'd imagined. What do you think, Papa?"

Chapter 764: The Miracle Route

At night, the Skull Cup became the liveliest place in the small oasis.

"I watched the duel between Osha and Sandstorm with my own eyes!" A customer swilled down a jug of Firelantern Wine and exclaimed. "The black-haired Divine Lady was simply unstoppable! The instant the gong was rung, she charged straight up to the opposing Divine Lady and knocked her out with a single blow from her shield!"

"Isn't the Divine Lady from the Sandstorm clan called Sandra Sandrain? She can use sand to create armor and launch attacks. How did she lose so easily?" Another customer questioned. "Even if she couldn't respond in time, the sand armor she was wearing should be tougher than the Northerners' armor. How did it not block the attack?"

"You think I'm lying? I wasn't the only one who saw it!" The customer bawled disgruntledly. "The sand armor may be tough, but I didn't see it work at all. The moment that Osha's Divine Lady charged up to her, the sand covering her body splattered on to the floor, and her face took a full blow from the shield. Don't you remember that in the first duel, Osha's Divine Lady stood up to a dozen Cut Bone warriors on her own? With that kind of strength, it's only out of mercy that Sandra isn't dead!"

"Splattered on to the floor...? Was she wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation?"

"Maybe, but I'm not sure about that. The Cut Bone and Sandstorm duelists were certainly wearing them, however. Maybe these things don't work on her."

"A Divine Lady who isn't affected by God's Stones...? How's that possible?"

"Will you stop interrupting?" Someone whined. "Give this man some more liquor and let him finish speaking!"

"Thank you." The customer took a sip of his newly-filled jug and continued, "Sandstorm clan probably didn't expect their Divine Lady to fall first, and quickly lost their formation. They had only sent out half of the quota, and Sandra was surely their side's linchpin. Once she fell, there was virtually no chance of victory."

"Not one person died, again?"

"Indeed. All 15 of them are alive. They were either struck by arrows on their shoulders and knees, or were knocked out by Osha's Divine Lady!"

A flurry of whispers was heard amongst the crowd.

"But this is nothing." The customer suddenly became even more excited, and stood on to the bar counter so that everyone could see him. "The duel two days ago was the truly unforgettable one! Osha versus Black River, a large clan infamous for its audacity and cruelty! I'm sure everyone has heard its name before. Of the duelists that fought against them, very few managed to survive! Though they don't have a Divine Lady, they are entirely made up of top-top-class warriors, and always send out a full strength of 30 people. Compared to the other two duels, a lot more blood was spilled this round, but..."

The entire tavern quietened down when they heard the word 'but'. Everyone was eager for the customer to complete his sentence.

"But... once again, not one person died on the platform!" The customer exclaimed.

Everyone in the crowd gasped.

"That's impossible! When I did some trading in Iron Sand City today, everyone was discussing the news of Black River clan's heavy losses. They even hung a black flag on the Stone Castle for mourning. And you claim that not one person died?"

"Ha, you really need to listen more carefully." The customer twitched his fingers. "I said that not one person died on the platform!"

"I can attest to that," someone swiftly chimed in, "I was also watching!"

"That's right. Although I wasn't in time for the second holy duel, I was able to make it the day before yesterday. The platform could be said to be flowing with rivers of blood, hence it's extremely impressive that no one died!" Another person added.

"What exactly do you mean?"

"Please elaborate for everyone's sake."

"Miss, give him another three jugs!"

"It's easy to understand. The Divine Lady gave them a chance, but even when their limbs were broken or fractured, they tried using their teeth to bite her. Under this circumstance, she was forced to nullify their counterattacking ability completely..." The customer deliberately paused for a moment. "She used a long knife to sever their limbs before she kicked them off the platform one by one!"

"If just an arm or a leg was severed, they would have been able to survive after some treatment. But without all four limbs, they weren't able to hold on until they reached Iron Sand City. The blood loss alone killed them. Can you really blame Osha for this?" He gulped down a large mouthful of wine and repeated his question. "What do y'all think? Speak up!"

"Probably not... they hadn't done so in the previous duels, and were forced to do so this time."

"That nobody died on the platform is sufficient proof that the Divine Lady had no intention to kill."

"That's right!"

"In my opinion, Black River deserves it. They didn't even know who their opponent was, and thought that their usual appearance would intimidate Osha!"

"Well said!"

"Barkeeper, give everyone another jug of Firelantern Wine. It's all on me tonight!" Someone shouted towards the second floor of the tavern.

Thuram, who had all the time been leaning against the window on the second floor, clapped his hands and replied, "No need. This round is on me. To Osha..."

"To Osha!"

The first floor of the tavern burst out in cheers.

Thuram finished the drink in his hand and let out a long sigh.

In the past week, the number of customers to Skull Cup had been rising. The first floor, which had been considered spacious, became overcrowded instead. Everyone was busy discussing only one thing, and that was the holy duels.

In fact, it was not only the tavern but also the small oasis which became packed. Wherever he went, he would see moribunds and half-deads from various clans inquiring about news of Osha. This was something that could never have happened in the past.

An upsurge in population was a huge burden for the administrators of the small oasis. The granaries never had enough stock to begin with, and furthermore, it was easy for people who came with bad intentions to blend into the crowds. According to the watchdogs' usual practice, the small oasis only allowed in Ironsand people who were able to bring benefits to the place - they had to be either merchants or warriors who sought refuge.

That the clanspeople from all corners of the Silver Stream Oasis were now free to gather here was entirely because of the orders of the new owner, Drow Silvermoon.

If he was the Thuram of old, his daily work would simply be intended to earn a few gold royals for the watchdogs, and at the same time set aside some money for himself. The transformation was more than he could ask for. At present, his fate was firmly interlocked with that of the Osha clan. It was exhausting enough to make sure that his men maintained order in the small oasis.

Fortunately, the new owner had already considered his circumstance. After the first duel, Drow allowed him to remain in the small oasis and focus on the domestic situation.

To ensure an adequate food supply, Iron Axe not only brought back a batch of food from the Cut Bone clan, but also offered gold royals to two other oases. When one of them rejected the deal, they were raided and seized by Graycastle soldiers the very next day, and their territory was exchanged for food from the food-abundant Silver River clan.

In reality, by this point in time, Thuram did not have the faintest idea what the Osha people's intentions were.

They not only accepted the challenge of a clan which had been previously unharmed, but also spared the warriors of Cut Bone and Sandstorm clan, allowing them to recover their full strength after a short rest. Even if they desired to be the top clan, doing so seemed completely meaningless!

The one thing that comforted Thuram was that the Divine Ladies brought back by Drow Silvermoon were indeed extremely powerful. The party always consisted of only four people, yet they had already beaten three large clans in succession. There were, at present, only two clans to go.

And tonight, there should be news from the Land of Fire once more.

The outcome of Osha's challenge against the Wildwave clan.

Chapter 765: The Last Battle

At midnight, a messenger came running to the tavern, panting.

"We won.....we won!" He said with a husky voice, without even drinking a drop of water, "Sir, the Osha clan has won!"

To return from the Land of Fire to the small oasis on foot it required a day, and if one could arrive on the same day if traveling by horse. It was obvious that once the fight was over he had immediately rushed back to the oasis.

The whole "Skull Cup" shook with the news.

"Ha, I knew they could win!"

"What was the course of events?"

"Tell us, how did they win?"

"No casualties as always?"

Talking and asking, everyone surrounded the messenger while at the same time the best fruit wine was delivered in front of him.

Thuram also felt relieved. After all, the stronger Osha was, the better life he would have as a member of the clan. He did not care much about the fact that it was not him who had led the clan to score such a victory in the fight. As long as he could make his clan members shed the half-dead and dead status, he would always believe that he had made a good bargain with Graycastle.

He clapped towards that clan member. "Take a breath first and then tell us the details of the fight."

"Yes!" The messenger satisfied his thirst with some fruit wine, took a deep breath and said, "The two sides didn't fight as the Wildwave clan reached an agreement with the Osha princess and willingly gave up the second seat!"

"What?"

Everyone in the tavern remained quiet for a while and then suddenly all of them started talking so loud that the roof seemed to shake!

"The two sides didn't fight?"

"Willingly giving up...does this count as surrender?"

"Doesn't this mean that Osha is one step away from becoming the chief clan?"

"Winning a series of four holy duels while not killing anyone. This has never happened before!"

"I also heard of this so I came as fast as I could."

"Haha, me too. If it wasn't for this, who would want to leave the Silver Stream Oasis during the cold winter.

"Damn, it was worth coming here!"

"To the Three Gods from Osha!"

"To Lady Drow Silvermoon!"

Thulam was also stunned for a moment. But not because of Wildwave clan's surrender—this kind of action was understandable. Saving their strength by keeping temporarily the third seat, waiting for Osha and Wildflame to both weaken through their battle and then finding the opportunity to regain second place, or maybe even becoming the chief clan. After all, they could afford to retreat, unlike Wildflame.

What surprised him was that he had suddenly come to realize, during all the chatting, what was his new master's purpose.

They were quickly gaining popularity!

There has never been a holy duel before that attracted as much of Sand people's attention as this one—the vengeful return of the Osha princess, the continuous challenges just like a mighty storm, no matter how many the enemies were... always fighting with four people, plus the extraordinary record of not killing anyone. All of these, as unbelievable as they may sound, greatly attracted people's curiosity.

Even though the holy duel was an important ritual in deciding each clan's position and power, but for many of the Sand Nation's people, that was very far from them. Some clans, from their establishment until their disappearance, would never leave the Silver Stream Oasis and so naturally would not care about the challengers and the fights between the clans.

After all, being able to stand out from a myriad of clans was so rare that the news of a normal alternation of power was not even as attractive as the news of the Osha being framed by the Ironwhip. But it was different this time. A clan member who had been subjected to exile and the daughter of a chief who was sold as a slave still had the opportunity to turn things around. Just by considering this, most of the weak clans had unconsciously taken the side of the Osha. But the things that happened afterward were even more bizarre and thus in just one month, Osha had turned from an unknown challenger into the center of Sand people's discussions.

The full of people tavern was the best proof.

No matter if they were full of expectation or sarcasm, or if they were just curious to see how far could Osha go, at least Drow Silvermoon had now become a household name. It was not hard to imagine that at the time of the last holy duel, numerous people would go to the Land of Fire to personally watch Osha's battle to ascend to the top.

Thuram naturally understood the meaning of such a reputation.

The last clan chief whose name spread throughout the entire Southernmost Region had almost unified the whole desert, and even though later he had fallen in the war with Graycastle, he was widely considered as the Three Gods Emissary.

Did the new master also had this goal in mind?

The only difference this time was that the Osha did not need to oppose Graycastle— the power supporting them was actually the northern kingdom which was suppressing the Sand Nation.

"His Majesty Roland Wimbledon will bring order and oasis to the Mojin Clan."

Thinking of Iron Axe's words, he suddenly realized that once Osha really became the chief clan, maybe something great would happen.

That would probably change the fate of all Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan.

Two days later, outside of the small oasis, at the camp of the First Army.

"Your injury... is it ok?" Echo looked at Ashes worryingly. The battle with the Black River clan had stained her whole body with blood—even though most of it was her opponent's, she still didn't come out unscathed.

"Don't worry, it won't affect our plan." Ashes carelessly untied her dark hair letting it fall on her loose cope. At times like that, it was impossible to see that she was an experienced fighter, but more of a graceful beauty. "Leaf's herbs are also very effective, the deeper cuts are almost healed."

"They are only a few exterior injuries, Extraordinary witches are physically better than us. After all, all of the nutrition goes to the muscles instead of the brain." Andrea shrugged. "When she was fighting alone against the church, she was hiding in places that even mice were not willing to stay, surviving on dead animals. If that didn't kill her then don't even mention these small injuries."

Ashes rolled her eyes but instead of arguing with her like usual, she leaned on the chair and closed her eyes.

"This is how a veteran should act," Iron Axe next to her thought, "apart from eating and fighting, the rest of the time should be used for resting, in order to restore both physical and mental health. The other witches of Neverwinter may also be strong but not many of them would be able to do that."

This is why His Majesty had delayed his plan only to wait for her.

"What're we going to do next?" Echo asked.

"We have done our best according to His Majesty's instructions." Iron Ax recalled Roland's instructions before their departure. Although some words were very hard to understand, like the making hype being the most important thing, by creating a topic, a legendary duel, so that the whole desert could hear their voice and so on...but in overall, the plan was to draw as much public attention as possible. Nowadays, more and more people were coming to watch the holy duel from various locations of the Silver Stream Oasis, so their plan was successful. "All that is left is to defeat Wildflame, and then, at the holy land, in the presence of everyone, you tell them what His Majesty has instructed you."

"I...Understood," Echo remained silent for a while and then clenched her fist as if motivating herself.

"Don't worry, lady Silvermoon, His Majesty didn't require everyone to understand this, you don't need to feel too much pressure." Iron Axe said. "You only need to do as usual and let your voice be heard everywhere in the Land of Fire. No matter how many people respond to us, the new order will spread in the whole Southernmost Region down the Silver Stream."

Suddenly, Thuram entered the room.

He saluted the four of them and took out a letter. "The Wildflame clan responded to Osha's challenge request, but...they require specific people to participate in the battle."

"What do you mean?" Andrea frowned.

"It says in the letter that Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan wishes to have a one on one fight with Ashes on the Burning Stage," Thuram replied respectfully.

Chapter 766: Ashes Against Lorgar!

The holy duel between Osha clan and Wildflame clan was about to begin as planned.

The Land of Fire had never been as lively as it was today, with the spectators almost surrounding the high platform—in order to ensure that more people enter the holy land, Iron Axe also released on loan a box of God's Stone of Retaliation. As long as one clan had no more than 50 people, the rest of the clans would not say anything.

Even if they wanted to, they wouldn't be able to stop them.

Osha nowadays was already the popular second strongest clan. As long as they did not oppose the Three Gods, anything they required had to be taken into careful consideration.

Under the cheerings of the crowd, Ashes slowly walked on the platform—the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan were full of respect for real fighters and her performance the past month had earned her everyone's respect.

Some were even calling her the strongest fighter in the Northern kingdom.

Thus, this fight was regarded as the battle between the strongest of the Northern kingdom and the strongest of the Southernmost Region.

Ashes was still dressed like usual, her long hair tied into a ponytail and hanging down her waist. She was wearing a black robe without any armor and not carrying any weapons.

But it wasn't because she was arrogant.

The Wildflame clan's request for an "unarmed fight" meant according to Thuram, a fight without any weapons, armor or other supporting items including God's Stones of Retaliation. Obviously, banning God's Stones would help Lorgar to some degree, since it would inadvertently weaken the Extraordinary's combat strength. Ashes believed that it was a coincidence, because in the past month, she had found out that they were not aware of the categorization of witch's powers. As long as one had awakened, she was regarded as a Divine lady, but they did not know of the most special type of witch: the Extraordinaries.

The opponent probably just wanted a good fight.

She ultimately agreed to this request, after taking into account that the ability of Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan still belonged to the melee type—this information had not only been confirmed by Thuram's description but also from many other sources. The Divine lady Lorgar's ability was almost similar to that of Maggie's, as she could turn into a monster while obtaining strength and agility far beyond that of ordinary people. This made her extremely excited. Who would be stronger, a transformed witch or an Extraordinary?

If it was an opponent like Anna, Ashes would have never accepted.

The unpredictable Blackfire could both defend and attack so there was no way to fight against it. Without the protection of God's Stone, it would almost be impossible to get closer than ten meters.

On the other hand, an equal combat would also be beneficial for her.

Since she found out about the Transcendent, Ashes were always thinking of improving her ability.

According to Agatha, becoming a Transcendent required everyday practice as well as continuously battling with strong opponents. This way, through life and death situations, one could achieve high evolution.

This was the main reason that led her to accept the opponent's request.

At that moment, a sudden cheer burst from the crowd as a woman wearing a hooded cloak swiftly jumped on the platform, heading towards Ashes. Being the strongest of them, the Sand people's cheering for her was slightly louder. There was no doubt that she was the opponent she had to face today—the Wildflame clan's Divine lady, Lorgar.

"You are Ashes?" she took off her hood and revealed her red curly hair as well as...a pair of tall fluffy ears.

Ashes was stunned, "Are these..dog ears?"

"Wolf ears!" Lorgar corrected her and her face instantly became red.

"Oh, you aren't wearing shoes? Isn't the ground too hot?" She gazed down at her bare feet.

"Mojins are never afraid of the hot sand," She tiptoed while taking off her cloak, exposing also a fluffy tail behind her.

Judging by her expression, it was obvious that it was hot...Ashes shrugged, "You are getting used to the consumption of magic power by always maintaining your transformation? It seems like a good way to practice."

"I don't understand what are you saying," Lorgar waved her tail. "This is the price for this ability given by the Three Gods, it's not some kind of practice—I have no way to transform back to human form so I can only live on as half human and half beast."

So that was the case, Ashes realized. Because she did not want to expose her appearance, she had to wear a cloak even such a hot place... and revealing her animalized form once she was already on stage would make everyone think that she had transformed because she had entered the battle.

So what the intelligence referred to as a monster, was actually a wolf?

She wasn't sure whether it would be effective or not to decrease Lorgar's fighting capacity by using a bone to allure her and distract her.

At least for Maggie, that would be extremely effective.

"What are laughing at?" Lorgar frowned. "Are you underestimating me?"

"No, nothing," Ashes suppressed her smile, "I just remembered a funny friend...since you are ready, let's begin."

"My thoughts exactly." Lorgar raised both of her hands and the once smooth female arms transformed into a pair of thick wolf claws. "Father, please knock the gong!"

Is this...partial animalization through free will? Ashes raised her eyebrows. Even though she was ignorant of the mysteries of magic power, she was still able to control and utilize her power properly. This was hard even for Maggie and only in dangerous situations were she able to do it.

As the chief of Wildflame hit the gong with intense, Lorgar pushed with both feet and lunged towards her.

The Wolf girl's speed was pretty fast but in the eyes of Ashes, it still wasn't that different from ordinary people's. She could even determine where the opponent's landing position would be and thus prepare her own attacking position in advance.

But she didn't do it.

Lorgar was obviously not using her full power but instead was planning to test her strength through such a move. So, Ashes decided to oppose her head on in order to make her realize that she had no chance to defeat her unless she completely transformed first.

She held out her hands and firmly grabbed Wolf girl's paws like a pincer. Then she turned her body and, using her opponent's momentum, she held her above her shoulders and smashed her forcefully on the ground.

This was the advantage of an Extraordinary. Partial animalization meant only partially strengthened power for Lorgar, but as for Ashes, each of her fingers, each of her tendons were strengthened at all times. Magic power would strengthen her body every day, continuously and no matter the time she would always feel her body surging with power.

She punched downwards, smashing the ground where Lorgar was lying. As for the latter, she had rolled over to dodge her and then put her hands upside down, bent her knees and kicked towards her.

But the kick that would have caused a viscera rupture on any adult was single-handedly grabbed by Ashes, who instantly squeezed it peeling off the skin of Lorgar's calf, almost breaking it. At that moment, Wolf Girl realized the danger through her pain, kicked towards Ashes' head with her other foot while simultaneously transforming her foot into a wolf leg!

Ashes loosened her five fingers and bent to escape the sweeping strike. Lorgar finally escaped and did not dare to keep on testing so she transformed her other leg into a wolf leg too—as a result, all four of her limbs had been completely animalized, which not only increased her height quite a bit but also improved her speed and strength.

As far as Ashes was concerned, her opponent's situation did not improve that much though. Any parts of her body that had not been animalized were obviously her weak spots.

For example the head and the abdomen.

The Extraordinary fiercely punched with two fists, forcing Lorgar to also use both of her paws to stop her. Then, she smirked and before the Wolf Girl could realize what happened, she forcefully hit the other's forehead with her own.

"Woo—"

Princess Lorgar couldn't help but utter a painful cry, with tears and blood coming out simultaneously. The huge impact had crashed her nose and she was forced by the the intense pain to close her eyes.

Ashes turned around, kicked Lorgar's soft abdomen and sent her flying!

Chapter 767: Extraordinary Training Method

The noisy field quietened down suddenly.

No one could have expected that Lorgar would have fallen into a disadvantage so soon after the fighting began. From the looks of this round, Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan was definitely wounded heavily.

Only Ashes knew that she had not used her full power in that attack. At that moment she struck Wolf Girl, the other party had already speedily retreated backward and had slightly curled her body. Therefore the attack was not taken at a full blow. In the face of a heavy blow, Lorgar consciously avoided being in the scope of the enemy's attack. This indicated that even if she had not experienced the real battle of life and death, at least she had put in a lot of efforts in training.

The girl fell to the ground and rolled around for two laps. Her body rapidly started to inflate, causing the clothes on her body to get torn to shreds. Her smooth skin exposed was covered by the fluffy light yellow mane.

"Um... she looks different from Maggie." Ashes pondered. "Fat Pigeon wraps herself up with hair and then transforms into a bird species, so this could be considered a purely physical change. No wonder she chooses to fight barefoot before, as she knows that every time she animalizes into a beast, she'll ruin a pair of shoes. That will be a heavy burden even for a big clan."

By contrast, Maggie was much more economical. Not only would she not damage her clothes, but she could also wrap her package in her hair and most of the time that meant she could carry an extra luggage.

"Ow ow ow woo—!"

When Lorgar stopped rolling, her body had completely changed its appearance.

A huge desert wolf appeared on the platform. Ashes had seen these wolves with yellow fur on her way to and from the Land of Fire. Compared to the snow wolves at Western Region, their fur was not only stubby and hard, but they were also thinner in shape. After sunset, their eyes would occasionally emit a green light, and they constantly had an insatiable look. Obviously, they led different lives from their same kind in the Misty Forest. Other than the lack of rich rations, they also faced the threat of other brutal predators.

But this wolf in front of her was way too large.

Even a horse would be dwarfed beside her. Just her limbs alone were already half a head higher than Ashes. If Lorgar stood on her hind legs, that would be the height of two adult men.

And her severely damaged nose was also reflected in the animalized body. The cocked bridge of her nose had a collapsed part, and the nostrils also blew out hot air and streaks of fresh blood.

Lorgar howled loudly and caused the onlookers at Sand Nation to gasp in astonishment. Not only Ashes, but it was the first time for everyone around to witness the changing process of the strongest goddess in the Southernmost Region. It was natural for them to feel great pressure and fear standing under such a burly body.

Without waiting for their inhaling sounds to subside, Wolf Girl sprang forward toward Ashes again.

This time Ashes looked more serious, as the latter's speed had almost reached the level of the God's Punishment Warriors. And with such a huge figure, its power certainly could not be underestimated.

She avoided Lorgar's thrust by moving aside and immediately realized that she had made the wrong move.

Wolf Girl's range after animalizing was too wide. Compared with the God's Punishment Army warrior that had the same size as common people, she often only needed to move one step to dodge the attack. And with two or three steps she could even counterattack. But for the giant beast, the number of steps needed to be increased at least several times.

Right now, Ashes barely avoided the attack, before the other party struck with her right claw and hit her like a huge wall.

"Boom—!"

Being unable to avoid the attack, she had no choice but to lift her arms to block the attack head-on.

Although the collision gave both sides exactly the same impact, the advantages of body shape at this moment were very clear. Lorgar's whole body trembled due to the impact, while Ashes was completely thrown out flying.

...

Under the platform, Echo could not help grabbing Andrea's wrist. "Ashes... Will she be alright?"

After animalizing into a huge beast, the situation was reversed. Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan kept pursuing Ashes, and the latter could only use most of her energy to defend and dodge with almost no way of fighting back.

Although both were unarmed, each of their kicks and punches was as sharp as an iron hammer at this level. Several wounds appeared on Ashes's body, and the blood gradually dyed her robes red.

"Don't worry, an attack like this won't cost her her life. She still hasn't given all her force." Andrea continued and said, "Ashes may not have many strengths, but she is exceptional at resisting attacks."

"Not yet given her... all?" Echo was startled and said, "But she's obviously panting, and she doesn't look at all relaxed!"

"Do you know the Extraordinary Training Method during the Taquila age?" Andrea asked in return.

"No, what's that?"

"It's a way to speed up the consumption of magic power so that one can be in training mode all the time... According to His Majesty Roland, this was both ancient and inefficient, hence it would be better to study two more books to analyze how muscles and bones can convert chemical energy into mechanical energy." She chuckled and said, "But I think for someone with the intelligence of Ashes, she might be particularly suitable for this stupid method—after all, letting her read a book was simply too difficult."

"Is that so?" Echo widened her mouth in surprise.

"Of course," said Andrea gracefully while she smoothened the ends of her hair. "Look, she's going to fight back."

...

As soon as Ashes managed to distance herself from her opponent, she pulled out a black tape from within her arms.

"What's that?" said Lorgar, who stopped in her tracks and shouted, "is that a weapon?"

The crowd was also stirred up.

The agreement of the holy duel was sanctioned by the Three Gods and deserters would be eternally spurned. So no one violated this even if it was not checked by anyone.

Ashes smiled and casually threw the cloth strap on the ground. It looked like a waist strap, but it made a dull crash when it fell on the ground as if she had thrown a heavy stone, instead of a gentle piece of cloth.

Wolf Girl's howlings suddenly contracted.

However, this was not the only burden.

Then she crouched down and took the two pieces of black tape that were tied to her ankles.

They looked ordinary but were handmade by Soraya. If they were ordinary fabrics, even the most sturdy canvas would not last more than a week. The cloth strap was divided into three layers. The innermost one was hollow, and filled with special iron bars. Each short part weighed about ten pounds. The cloth strap for the waist would be equivalent to the weight of carrying an adult person.

When she stood up again, she felt her whole body full of strength again and the long-lost sense of ease once again returned to her body.

"Extraordinaries wear this kind of thing to practice. The faster the magic is consumed, the stronger the body gets." Ashes still remembered what Agatha said at that time. "Even many people bring them to the battlefield, and at the most crucial moment, the most unexpected power could be released. If all went well and you persisted for five to six years, you could even hope to break through the body's shackles and become a Transcendent."

And now, just over a year and three months have passed.

Chapter 768: Bloodbathed Battle

This was the first time Ashes initiated the attack since Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan had completely animalized.

Lorgar also did not back down and lifted her body toward her opponent. But this time she found that her attacks could no longer be coherent, and even with a wide range of Sweeping Strike, it was difficult to force the other party to block or counterattack. She was always a little slower than Ashes. She could hit Ashes before, but now she could only tear off a corner of her clothing.

And more often than not, she could not reach anything.

After fighting for a moment, Wolf Girl had to use a strong tactic. When her right claw was unsuccessful, she had to use the remainder of her strength to rotate her body, and use her stout tail to hit the other party—this tactic allowed her to instantly place half of the platform within her attacking range. Even if Ashes were quick on her feet it would be impossible to retreat completely, unless she had no intention from the start to approach. A tail like an iron whip could easily scrape off fresh flesh, and most of the wounds on Ashes were left behind by this move.

However, the expected crash did not come.

Sounds of exclamation could be heard coming from the platform.

Oh no!

Lorgar's heart suddenly had a bad premonition and at the same time, she saw a fallen figure from the corner of her eye.

She—can fly?

All the bystanders were staring with their eyes wide open. They saw Ashes levitating even over the top of Wolf Girl who was half a head taller than her, and she landed directly on the turning head of her opponent!

Tail attacks had a wide range, yet could only sweep close to the ground raid without being a threat to mid-air targets. However, it would be extremely difficult for most people to jump over such a great distance. As it would be easy for opponents to judge the landing point leading to the inevitable next attack, so few people would jump into a duel.

Unfortunately, after Wolf Girl rotated her body to do a sweeping strike, her tail part became her blind zone.

Ashes no longer chose to show mercy, but smashed her fist into Lorgar's eye, causing the eyeballs to split open suddenly. A mass of blood splashed over half of her body, and severe pain caused the latter to scream out hoarsely. Even if the body could bear the attack, the organs such as the eyes were still very fragile parts. After losing one eye, the duel had quickly tilted its balance in favor toward the Extraordinary.

However, just as Ashes intended to withdraw her fist and give her opponent a chance to surrender, she found that Lorgar's eye was closed and her right hand was gripped tightly by her eyelids and face muscles. In the meantime, a giant claw came flashing toward Ashes—even if this claw managed to wound her, it would also increase the trauma of Wolf Girl's eye.

Lorgar showed that she was determined to fight.

Normally, imprisonment like this would be unable to trap the Extraordinary witch, but just slow down her actions by a little. But at such a critical moment, even a breath of time could be extremely deadly.

Ashes knew very well that she could not avoid it, so she did not hesitate and lifted the other arm to face the attack head-on.

She seemed to have heard the sound of her broken bones caused by the tremendous impact.

She sprayed out a mouthful of fresh blood.

This was probably the first time after the duel started that she was really hit.

As the two separated, Ashes noticed that her left arm had been bent into a weird shape.

"Roar——!"

Lorgar roared loudly and rushed towards Ashes with her mouth wide open, ready to bite.

Instead of retreating, Ashes rolled forward. She escaped the other party's bite and crawled under the blind zone of Wolf Girl's neck. Then with one hand holding the ground, she kicked both legs to the other's forelimb.

With a loud noise, the forelimb bent out like a folding door. And at this point, the three-legged Wolf Girl almost lost her ability to attack.

"Lorgar, that's enough!" The head of Wildflame Guelz shouted.

"No, I can still fight!" Lorgar replied breathlessly. "Her situation isn't much better. I just need to hold on for a while... hold on for a while and it'll be alright!"

Ashes licked the bloodstains from the corner of her mouth, and could not help but laugh.

Her opponent was right as her situation was indeed not too good. The heavy blow caused her whole body to ache and her internal organs felt like they had shifted positions; her arm was also broken and drooping weakly beside her. She looked as pathetic as the one-eyed giant wolf that was standing with three legs.

However, a man could move by two legs, but a wolf could not. Coupled with the loss of one eye, the limited vision would further hinder Wolf Girl's action. If she could not accurately hit the enemy, then being strong and powerful would be meaningless. This was what she had learned from her experience of fighting with the God's Punishment Warriors.

The other thing that could be confirmed was that she was now a lot stronger than she was a year ago.

This was particularly obvious when she received that great impact. Ashes could clearly feel the magic power in her body flow faster than ever before, and time seemed to slow down in that instant. She could even see the claws and meat pad that kept coming close toward her. And most of the magic gathered in her forearm, so she had an unprecedented strength.

If it were her in the past, this strike would not only have broken that arm that was used as a shield, but would have also cracked her ribs and internal organs.

But for now, she just felt pain and not numbness nor weakness.

Was this what Agatha meant by the life and death sentiment?

She felt as if she was standing in front of a thick door.

If Wolf Girl could partially control her magic power to partly animalize her own body, could the Extraordinary apply the same method each time to attack with a strength beyond the limits of her own power?

This may be a worthwhile exercise.

Of course, the most important thing now is to resolve this duel.

If I break even the other eye, she will have no choice but to admit defeat, right?

Anyway, with the help of Leaf's herbs, she could stay alive. As long as she could be towed back to the Western Region, Nana would be able to heal her back to brand new.

Ashes took a deep breath and bent down slightly.

Lorgar also got ready for an attacking stance and exposed her fangs at the same time.

Both of them knew that the next blow would be the final blow for both parties, no matter what the outcome was. Only one person would be standing on the platform.

The heavy atmosphere infected all the spectators and the entire scene was silent, leaving only the sound of the burning ground.

Just as Ashes was about to move, there was a sudden scream from Echo. "Be careful, overhead!"

She rapidly looked up and saw a huge monster rushing down that had expanded wings even wider than the platform. Its claws were like open blades, and as thick as an arm. Only when it got close to the ground, could she hear the hiss of the air stream passing over its wings.

Ashes jumped aside with her greatest strength to avoid the monster's diving attack range.

And through the corner of her eye, she saw that Lorgar was also trying to dodge its attack. But because of her broken forelimbs, she was unable to and got hit directly by the enemy.

With a boom, the platform was smashed into several cracks by this meteoroid-like impact.

Lorgar cried out piercing screams.

Chapter 769: Unyielding Will

"By the name of Three Gods! That's... the Four-winged Eagle!"

"How dare this beast break into the Burning Shrine!"

"Help, help me!"

"Guards, where are the guards?"

Screams of panic and disbelief came from the crowd. Some of the Sand Nation people pulled out their weapons and climbed up the platform to save Lorgar, while the others wanted to flee. The scene suddenly became quite chaotic.

Ashes could see clearly through the smoke that the bird was actually a giant demonic beast. It resembled a demonic hybrid of an eagle and a beetle. The back, lower abdomen, and head were covered with a striped shell. It had six claws and each section could be clearly seen. The front pair was the thickest and held Lorgar firmly on the ground like an iron clamp. The four pairs of wings, which should have been as thin as cicada wings were thick like bird wings and became its most striking feature.

Nature could never produce such an ugly monster.

The demonic beast kept trying to peck her neck while pressing down Wolf Girl. Its claws could not be avoided, and Wolf Girl could only sway from left to right to avoid the attack. The inability to move her body greatly limited the range that she could dodge. In a short time, her cheek already suffered a few scratches, and the fresh blood stained her fur. By the look of things, she would not be able to hold for a long time and would be killed by the demonic beast.

Ashes would definitely not allow it to happen.

Ashes assisted Iron Axe in participating in the Desert Mission because of Tilly; using the holy duel to decide victory was also the choice of the latter. She had the aid of Leaf's herbs and Nana's treatment, so she took this matter very seriously in order not to let Lorgar down. However, Lorgar was still a witch, and so long as she was not evil like a Pure Witch, there was no way Ashes could sit by idly and let her die in the hands of the demonic beast.

"Echo!"

Ashes shouted, and then plunged toward the demonic hybrid. She clung to its mouth at that moment when it was trying to peck again.

The sharp corner of its mouth scratched her arm and the blood dripped bit by bit on Wolf Girl's face, but she was still motionless.

Wolf Girl looked up at Ashes weakly with her remaining eye. Her dark pupil revealed a complex look.

At the same time, Echo's lullaby could be heard. The music gradually dispersed everyone's panic and soothed the crowd that was trying to escape.

Without the interference from the surrounding crowd, repeated gunfire sounds could be heard from where Andrea was standing.

She was different from the First Army that might accidentally wound the witch. Her precise shooting ability ensured that as long as there was a glimmer of space, she could hit the target perfectly.

Ashes saw Lorgar's claws tremble fiercely. Then several rounds of bullets hit the same joint position, breaking the Four-winged Eagle's claws directly into two pieces.

After losing the clamp, Lorgar rolled up and kicked the beast's belly, and kicked it out. The latter flapped its wings and rose again. Only now did the First Army squad ring out the gunshots for the very first time. Unfortunately, it was not so easy to hit a flying target that could circle or swing up and down and was behaving more like an erratic insect than a bird.

"Are you ok?" Ashes took off her black robe and covered the diminishing body of the huge wolf.

"Temporarily... Ahem, I won't die yet..." Lorgar that had regained her human form, coughed out a mouthful of blood foam, and struggled to climb up but failed several times.

"Don't move around or else you will aggravate your wounds." Ashes groped along her body and discovered that one side of the chest was sunken down and she could feel the bumps of the raised bones. It was clear that several ribs were broken in the previous violent impact. It was fortunate that the wolf form could resist the impact of the heavy attacks. If she had retained her human form, that attack would have probably taken her life.

Wildflame clan warriors also surrounded the area with their short bows and aimed toward the demonic beast in the sky. But even firearms could not be effective at this distance, therefore arrows were even more useless.

"Watch out! It's coming again!" Echo warned everyone again.

"Everyone get out of the way!"

Ashes hugged Lorgar and rolled on the spot to avoid the grazing attack of the demonic beast. Several clan warriors were unable to avoid it and were thrown out with their chests heavily deflated, so they were unlikely to survive.

The Four-winged Eagle obviously had a high level of intelligence. It seemed to realize that the only thing that could threaten it was the rifle held by Andrea. When it was diving and attacking Lorgar, it would always use its abdomen's shell to face the blonde witch. It also followed a rocking motion and a polyline flight path. When Andrea was refilling, the demonic beast would throw the people it captured toward Hummingbird and Echo to obstruct her filling action and also rotate the direction of attack.

Andrea avoided the danger several times by a thin thread. In addition to paying attention to the movements of the demonic beast, she also had to take care of the other two partners. If she had not mastered the new evolutionary skills that enabled her to release a strong air stream at close range, she would have been thrown down ages ago by the demonic beast.

Ashes could not help frowning as this Four-winged Eagle seemed like it was targeting the witches.

If it simply wanted to prey on food, the platform was full of people, and no one would have stopped it from taking away one or two people. But it dived repeatedly to attack Lorgar or would stare at Andrea and the other witches. It showed no interest in the ordinary people and was vastly different from the rumored brutal and bloodthirsty assailant.

The First Army had only 50 soldiers that entered the Land of Fire and were no help in dealing with a flexible target in the air. Ashes thought it was necessary to lead it to the top of the large army and hopefully, it could be shot down with more intense gunfire.

But... what exactly needed to be done?

At this moment, Lorgar grabbed her hand.

"Throw me upwards." Wolf Girl gasped and spoke one word at a time.

"What?"

"Ahem... Throw me up!" She repeated. "When it's coming toward us, that's the only... the only chance I can catch it. I can't act on my own, I can only depend on you!"

"If you don't succeed, you may die here," said Ashes.

"A warrior's second home has always been the battlefield," said Lorgar, with her ears drooping down. "So at least I've resisted until the very end. You are the most powerful warrior I've ever met... Ahem... You've given me the chance to experience such a wonderful fight. Thank you."

Ashes saw a firm resolve from her expression and nodded after a moment of silence, "I see. But you're mistaken, it's not our last fight."

"Even if I... manage to stay alive, it will be impossible for me to stand like a normal person. You don't need to comfort me." She laughed at herself.

Even if she could recover from such heavy wounds, she would still be disabled. Perhaps death would be a better option for her.

"There's a witch called Nana in Neverwinter of Graycastle, who can heal any man back to brand new. Even someone who's breathing his last or whose limbs are entirely broken," said Ashes, slightly widening her mouth.

The wolf's ears became erect in the blink of an eye.

"What you just said... is that true?"

"Of course, I have gone through no less than a hundred battles like this one, and there were even more powerful enemies. And if you want to hone your skills, you can find opportunities at any time. So if you live..." Ashes stopped here without finishing what she wanted to say, as she realized that the other party's remaining eye now reflected a brand new light.

"I'll survive, for sure."

"Well, come up then."

Ashes no longer hesitated and grabbed Lorgar's foot with one hand. She took advantage of Four-winged Eagle diving toward the center of the platform, to fling herself around for two turns before throwing Lorgar out—

Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan was like a flying arrow with her black robes, aiming at the monster that was flying straight down.

Chapter 770: Echo and Drow Silvermoon

"Siyaaaaa!"

The Four-winged Eagle let out a peculiar high-pitched sound as it probably did not expect the other party to take the initiative in attacking it.

It opened its beak and without a moment to spare, immediately attacked Lorgar without bothering to dodge.

What happened next shook the hearts of the onlookers.

Lorgar instantly transformed into a massive Desert Wolf and smacked the strange bird's face with thunderous strength! The eagle's head bent to one side and its beak that was originally able to pick up an adult with ease suddenly broke away.

It was then already too late for the demonic hybrid to adjust its balance, so the two beasts just fiercely collided with each other.

Lorgar once again spits out fresh blood, but she still tightly grabbed on to the demonic beast, and her teeth sank deeply into its flesh.

The demonic beast sensed danger from the Desert Wolf clinging on to her and desperately flapped its wings trying to fly up. However, no matter how hard it moved its wings, it was unable to gain altitude due to the Wolf Girl who weighed as heavy as itself.

"Andrea!" Ashes shouted at her companion.

"I knew that you would have to depend on me eventually," said Andrea. She threw her rifle back to Echo and leaped up the platform while summoning the Magical Longbow.

At the same time, the two beasts smashed down heavily onto the platform.

With a flash of white light, the Desert Wolf which was sitting on top of the Four-winged Eagle suddenly disappeared. Ashes knew then that Lorgar had already reached her limit. But fortunately, the outcome of this battle had already been decided. She took a dead Sand Nation warrior's robe and rushed toward the demonic beast.

Upon closer inspection, she could see that the demonic beast's back and the abdominal shell was pockmarked with several wounds. Some were scratches, while others were small holes that oozed green slime and blue blood. These wounds were probably left by the First Army, but none of them had inflicted fatal damage to the demonic beast.

She quickly found the motionless Princess Lorgar in the gap between the wings and carried her down the platform.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the longbow in Andrea's hands shining with golden light.

The hybrid demonic beast that had been wounded quite severely had its head swaying and was staggering on the ground when it suddenly found something resembling a golden sun next to it.

"Hey, what are you looking at?" Andrea laughed mockingly. "Fly away if you can."

"Shriek—!" It finally recovered its senses and tried spreading its wings in a panic to escape. But it was too late.

A blinding ray of light shot out from the Magical Longbow, and with a thundering whistle, it pierced through the demonic beast's body. In a flash, its body suddenly started emitting countless beams of golden light, as if a sun was trying to break out of its body and began engulfing it in its glow!

As it quieted down, a circular crater a few meters wide appeared in the middle of the platform. All that was left of the Four-winged eagle was a piece of its body lying on the edge of the gap, and its remaining body parts were splattered all over the place like tiny droplets of rain.

Andrea stood proudly in this torrential rain of flesh and gore, with her golden bow giving her long hair and alluring figure an eye-catching silhouette.

"Why are you still materializing your longbow? Are you wasting your magical power?" Ashes who was under the platform got grumpy and stood up.

"Of course, it's for the people here to remember my heroic appearance... ah, sh*t." She suddenly covered her mouth halfway through her sentence. "It's all your fault for making me talk. What if some bird meat fell into my mouth?"

Ashes could only roll her eyes at that.

...

The Wildflame chief Guelz had an ashen face as he gently received his daughter from Ashes. With his shoulders slightly quivering, he said, "Is Lorgar... "

"She's still alive, but it doesn't look good. Even the best herbal remedies can only delay her death." Ashes shrugged and said, "Unless we treat her immediately."

"You... have a way to cure her?"

"That's right, and she can be as healthy as she was before the duel."

Guelz stared with his eyes wide open and gazed at the Extraordinary witch for a while before finally slowly opening his mouth. "Then... what's the price?"

"You'll know soon enough," Ashes tugged her hand and said, "But what I want to know is... Will you acknowledge the result of the holy duel?"

"Wildflame isn't Ironwhip, and we won't deny a victory that was won through blood and honor. Furthermore..." Guelz sighed and said, "no one can deny that you are currently the strongest clan. If you don't believe, you can listen for yourself..."

Ashes have certainly heard it.

Be it on the platform or the Burning Road, every single person present was shouting a single name in unison.

"Osha! Osha! Osha!"

It was among this cheer, that Echo climbed up to the platform.

"I am the chief of the Osha clan, Drow Silvermoon, but I also have another name, Echo of Graycastle's Witch Union!" Her voice sounded clearly above the noise of the crowd and reached everyone's ears. "I have lost everything since the betrayal of the Iron Whip clan. Not only was my clan exiled, but I was also sold into slavery, from the Port of Clearwater, all the way to the King's City in Graycastle. I was fortunate enough to be rescued by a witch organization. After that, I was transferred to a small town in the Western Region, where my name has been changed to Echo."

She paused momentarily, then said, "I prefer the name Echo more than Drow Silvermoon—though I have been through some painful experiences, I am so much happier than I ever was in the desert. That town, which was once a desolate town on the border, has now become a bustling city. Most of the growth during this period was brought by a Lord, His Majesty Roland Wimbledon of Graycastle, and he was also the one who changed my destiny!"

Ashes were stunned. "This... doesn't sound like the rehearsed speech."

"Well," said Andrea, with a light chuckle, "it's what she's been wanting to say the most. And besides, all we can do now is applaud her."

In the beginning, Echo seemed a bit nervous, but once she started talking about Neverwinter's interesting lifestyle, she began to talk with increasing confidence. "I know you are curious as to why I'm saying all these things, after all, it's just someplace in the North. No matter how beautiful it is, it has nothing to do with our people in the Sand Nation. That's right... Maybe this was the way it used to be, but now things are not the same!"

"His Majesty's catchphrase is that Neverwinter will never discriminate based on origin. His city has people from all kinds of backgrounds: ordinary people from Graycastle, witches, and even people from foreign clans! This is enough to prove his kindness and benevolence. Now he intends to save the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan from this blood-soaked, barren desert and grant you all a better life, just like he did when he helped the witches—and I'm carrying out the will of His Majesty, Roland Wimbledon, to deliver this news to all of you in the name of the strongest clan: he has decided to become the chief of the Mojin Clan to unify the entire desert and treat us all as his people!"