

KEEPER 154

Chapter 154: THE COUNCIL: THE DESERT ASSEMBLY

The old guardians had all felt it, even long before the Sand Regent called for a meeting. The Sand Regent controls the desert trade routes and nomadic war tribes. No army crosses the southern deserts without their permission. Their scouts are said to move through the dunes like ghosts. Yet something bizarre had kept him and his scouts out of the desert for the first time. The desert had stirred violently before an even bigger tragedy befell it. It had rained in the desert. It might have been a sign of tragedy, or perhaps the desert was weeping because of the absence of someone who always stood at its centre. Was the rain tears of joy or tears of anger?

The desert had not rained in twenty years when the tragedy had struck that none dared speak of but which everyone felt. Back then, it was clear the desert was weeping the loss of its most beloved. Even long before then and long after, not a drop had touched the endless dunes of N'kara, the sacred heart of the southern lands. The sand was old here, older than the tribes, older than the wars that shaped the lands.

That morning, the desert had screamed. The dunes trembled as if something enormous had turned beneath them. Sand spiraled into the sky, twisting like ghostly pillars before collapsing again. The ground groaned, a deep sound that traveled for miles across the wasteland.

And then the rain came. Heavy. Sudden and long. Large drops struck the burning sand, releasing thin streams of steam that curled toward the sky like spirits escaping the earth.

Around the Stone Circle of the Ancients, the Southern Council watched in silence.

They were thirteen figures seated on low carved thrones of desert stone. Their cloaks were woven from faded indigo cloth and desert leather, marked with symbols of tribes that had survived centuries of war and drought. Each of them had seen omens before. But never one like this. They had seen it once, and they did not wish to see another.

At the center sat Elder Maresha, the oldest of them all. His skin was dark and weathered like cracked earth, and thin silver beads hung from the braids in his hair. His staff rested across his knees, its head carved in the shape of a serpent devouring its own tail.

The Iron Matron was also in attendance among the six wandering members under Maresha. Every major weapon forged in the south passes through the Iron Matron's influence. Entire armies rely on her foundries. She can cripple nations simply by halting the flow of steel. She is known for her love of

money. Yet she was still loyal to the South. Her loyalty to supply still may not be guaranteed, and only purchased, but her loyalty to the South was unquestionable.

The Prince of Tides, among the wandering, was in attendance too, which could only highlight the intensity of the situation. He had left his domain far south on the Southern seas and ports. The Prince of Tides commands merchant fleets, naval forces, and the great harbors of the southern coast. Trade, smuggling, and naval warfare all fall under his watch. It is said he knows every ship that enters southern waters.

The Veiled Speaker, the third member of the wandering, stood warped from head to toe. Just like the spies under him. His domain is the intelligence and spies whose Secrets are their currency. No one knows the true identity of the Veiled Speaker. They control the largest network of spies and informants in the south. No one breathes without the veiled speaker knowing, yet even he seemed not to know what was happening. Secrets are their currency.

The fourth member of the wandering, The Archivist. The man in charge of Ancient knowledge and forbidden texts. The Archivist guards ruins, relics, and ancient knowledge buried in the southern lands. Many believe they possess records of powers that existed before the modern kingdoms. His guards, whom he planted deep in the desert, had not come out yet, but he held his stance. If they could not stand such an omen, then no one could.

The Beast Warden, the fifth member of the wandering, sat in a desert crab, which could explain his quick arrival. His domain is the Wild territories and monster containment. It is the duty of the Beast Warden to oversee the hunting, capture, and control of dangerous creatures that roam the southern wilds. Rumor claims they keep living monsters in hidden strongholds.

The last wandering member is The Hawkeye Judge. Just like his name suggested. He is the law and arbitrator between southern powers. When conflicts erupt between southern houses, warlords, or guilds, the Hawkeye Judge decides the outcome. Their rulings are absolute.

Elder Maresha was the first to speak once all the members had gathered.

"The desert stirs." His voice was low but carried easily through the circle. "This is an omen. Good or bad I do not know."

"The sands have slept for too long. Without the Keeper, the land has been dying," one of the council members said, watching the rain that had not ceased for hours.

Another council member shifted forward. The iron matron. "Rain in N'kara," she whispered. "That is not death. That is awakening."

Across the circle, the general, the war-chief of the southern tribes, slammed the butt of his spear into the sand. "Or it is a warning," he said. "The desert remembers blood. The last time it moved like this, the N'garu were slaughtered." Everyone knew the general had never forgiven himself, and he wished to pay blood for whoever had stabbed the very heart of the south. Everyone had not forgotten that night. It was still fresh in everyone's minds.

The great chief of the four tribes of the south had not been able to take it. He had blamed himself for opening the borders of the south, going against the wishes of his predecessors and ancestors who had kept the south hidden. He had just ascended the seat of the great chief, and it was a time of peace. He had thought that opening the borders of the south was a good thing. He had died of grief back then.

A heavy silence followed. The name was rarely spoken.

N'garu.

The clan that once walked between worlds. The clan that guarded the Echo. Elder Maresha slowly lifted his eyes to the darkening sky where storm clouds rolled above the dunes. It was as if, at the mention of the name, the rain had intensified, whether in rage or in

"The desert does not weep for the dead," he said. "It calls for the living." His lips trembled. Many had believed that the only reason the desert had stood at bay and not eating the south was that something or a trace of what it loved still existed. Many in the council perhaps believed that the old madman was being delusional again.

Mother Keshara, the iron matron's breath caught.

"You think..." she said in a small voice.

"I know," the old elder replied. Because the desert snake imprisoned called to her mate before he died last night. The mate is not in the south, but it is where the keeper is. He drove his staff into the wet

sand, and the council felt it deep beneath their feet. Everyone knew that the desert's mythical snakes, though powerful once they found their mate, could not live without them for long. The serpent, having lived this long, meant it had been waiting for something, or perhaps Maresha had thought. The council had not meant to imprison the beast, but it had been necessary because their master had refused to talk.

"The Keeper has awakened," he said, and the silence was even louder now.

"The guardian must have known, yet he chose to be imprisoned. That cunning fox." It was Hawkeye who dared speak this time. It seemed he had made a faulty

"If he lives then, we need that fox. he is tight-lipped as he is loyal. Only he might know where the keeper or this person the desert calls for is. We can't possibly search all the lands." The beast warden said. He had not approved of imprisoning the serpent, but he had been overruled. Back then, the council, the rulers, and the land had fallen into disarray, and many decisions had been made. "After pushing his pets to their death, you think he is willing?" he scoffed.

Wind rushed across the desert, whipping cloaks and scattering sand across the circle.

"You think one of the N'folu lives, and this has anything to do with him. delusion," the prince of tides said. He hated delusion more than anything and only worked on facts. Another silence befell the council. Many had speculated over the years that a N'folu lived, but it had all turned to delusion. Many had even turned themselves in, believing themselves to be the survivors of N'folu, but the desert had not responded.

"Yet the desert has responded to something after sixteen years," the archivist said

"If the last son of N'garu lives, we need to find him or her," another member added.

"Only the veiled speaker can penetrate other territories. I will provide the steel.

"I will provide the transportation," the tide prince said.

Everyone kept pledging, but the veiled speaker said nothing and only disappeared in a blur after the last pledge. No one ever knew what the man was thinking or even his face. He was as mysterious as the secrets he kept.

Around the circle, the council rose one by one. Some in hope. Some are in fear. Who could really tell what this meant?