2316 Winning Strategy  
  
While crafting arrows, Sunny picked one up with a shadow hand and used it to draw a grid in the ash.  
  
Seven rows of seven squares each… forty-nine in total.  
  
Then, he marked some of the squares with various runes.  
  
Sunny had not paid a lot of attention to the placement of the figures on the jade board, but he could still recall it flawlessly. There were also five squares marked by special carvings - one at the very center of the board, and one at the middle squares of each outer row.  
  
Eventually, he pointed to the grid and spoke.  
  
'This is what the game board looked like in the Toy Room. As you can see, the Ash Domain is on the verge of losing. We only have three squares left, occupied by the Ash Tyrant - that is me - and two Ash Beasts. That is you and Slayer.'  
  
He pointed to the three squares in the lowest row of the grid. Since one of them was the middle square of an outer row, it was marked with a special rune.  
  
'You should have seen the fortress behind us. I think that it is the Ash Castle - one of the special squares Seishan mentioned. There is a similar carving on the opposite square, so this is where the Snow Castle should be.' Sunny pointed the arrow to the middle square of the uppermost row.  
  
'However, the carvings on the other three special squares are different. They are not Castles, but what are they? I do not know. The one in the very middle of the board is different from the two on the left and right outer rows, as well.'  
  
Sunny sighed. 'Well, we'll learn eventually. What is more important is where the twelve Snow Abominations are standing. Do you see a pattern?'  
  
Kai studied thе grid.  
  
On it, three Snow Beasts were facing the three remaining Ash figures. On the opposite side of the board, the Snow Tyrant was standing in the Snow Castle, defended by a Snow Devil and two Snow Beasts in the row below. The second Snow Devil was guarding the central square of the board. A Snow Demon and two Snow Monsters were defending the middle square on the right outer row.  
  
And finally, the last Snow figure - another Demon - was in the lower left corner, all by itself.  
  
Kai frowned. 'It looks to me like… three Beasts are preparing to besiege the Ash Castle, while the rest of the figures are protecting important squares on the board. Three are protecting the Snow Castle and their Tyrant, three are protecting whatever that right middle square is, one is protecting the heart of the map. And one seems to have lost its way and wandered into a corner.'  
  
Sunnу grinned. 'Exactly.'  
  
Kai stared at him for a while, then asked: 'So?'  
  
Sunny looked at him meaningfully. ',How should I know? Do I look like a great chess player to you?'  
  
Kai blinked a couple of times. 'You're not?'  
  
Sunny scoffed. 'No, I am not. To be honest, as soon as I understood what it takes to be good at playing chess, I instantly lost interest. Let me tell you… it's not a game, it's a chore! Why would I waste my time mastering something so tedious?'  
  
He shook his head.  
  
Playing chess with Teacher Julius had been fun and exciting at the beginning, but when Sunny realized that it was all about patterns and calculations, he rapidly grew bored. After all, he did enough calculating in his actual life, alreаdy.  
  
The chaotic mayhem of checkers seemed more fun. And naturally, nothing beat the noble king of games, backgammon…  
  
Because there were countless ways to cheat when throwing dice, which was the funnest part.  
  
Sunny looked at Kai. 'Why? Are you good at chess?'  
  
Kai scratched the tip of his nose. 'Not really. To be honest, being serious about chess takes a lot of time. And I, uh… always had better ways to spend my time.'  
  
Sunny looked at him with suspicion. 'Did he just ρolitely point out that he had a life?'  
  
Well, naturally! That guy had probably been too popular to be the president of the chess club. If Kai had been the president of any club, it would have probably been the heartthrob club.  
  
Shaking his head, Sunny sighed. 'So, none of us knows anything about how to win at chess. Plus, this is not even chess… this is Death Game. Actually, it is a bizarre version of the Death Game created by Ariel, which functions according to its own set of rules. We do not know these rules yet, so it will be hard to come up with a strategy.'  
  
He stared at the grid, a concerned expression on his face.  
  
But then, Sunny stirred. 'Actually…'  
  
He turned his head and looked at Slayer, who was idly standing a few steps away from them.  
  
'I was not entirely correct. There is someone among us who might know everything about how to play Death Game.'  
  
Slayer was the shadow of a person who had lived in the Dream Realm thousands of years ago. Since Death Game had been popular among her people, she might have very well been a masterful player.  
  
Sunny scrutinized her for a while, then asked hopefully: 'Hey. Do you know how to play the Death Game? What is the best strategy?'  
  
Was victory even possible when forty-six of the forty-nine squares already belonged to the Snow Domain?  
  
Slayer turned her head and looked down at him, her inky-black eyes betraying no emotion.  
  
Sunny almost lost hope when she suddenly moved, looking at the grid he had drawn.  
  
The Shadow remained motionless for a while, then used the arrow in her hand to carve a run in the ash.  
  
Kai looked at the rune with curiosity. ',Sacrifice?'  
  
Sunny nodded slowly. 'Yes… sacrifice. To be precise, it's a particular kind of sacrifice. A sacrificial killing.'  
  
So, the strategy Slayer recommended… was slaying someone as a sacrifice.  
  
Kai frowned. 'Is she suggesting that you should sacrifice one of your pawns?'  
  
Sunny was looking at the grid. Eventually, he slowly shook his head.  
  
'No… I don't think so. Do you remember what else Seishan said? That there are special squares in certаin versions of Death Game called Shrines. There, adversary figures can be sacrificed to enhance your own.'  
  
If the Shrines were important enough for Slayer to point at them as the secret of achieving victory… then the Snow Tyrant would put a lot of importance into protecting the Shrines, as well.  
  
From that, Sunny could deduce which of the five special squares hid the Shrines.  
  
'If I am not mistaken, they are the middle squares of the right and left outer rows.'  
  
Sunny looked at Slayer and smiled. 'So, you can write, huh?'  
  
She just stared at him silently.  
  
Sunny chuckled, then asked in a teasing tone: 'Well, then, can you please spell it out for us… how do we win this damn game?'  
  
Slayer regarded him silently for a moment, then leaned forward.  
  
The tip of her arrow plunged into the ash, pierced the square where the Snow Castle stood, and destroyed the runes describing the Snow Tyrant.  
  
Sunny stared at the arrow for a few seconds, and then grinned. 'Figures…'