2182 Royal Hospitality  
  
Step. Step. Another step.  
  
The chains rattled as Cassie walked, trying to maintain some of her dignity despite the shackles. She was quite used to those, luckily, having spent most of her time in the Third Nightmare chained.  
  
However, it was different this time.  
  
Things had gone more or less as expected when she and Helie emerged from the Hollows and were found by the forces of Song. It was a lone pilgrim who had noticed them first, but once one of the Queen's puppets did, all of them knew.  
  
So, her daughters did not take long to arrive from the Lesser Crossing Stronghold — Lonesome Howl, Silent Stalker, and Death Singer. They were the ones whom Cassie surrendered herself to.  
  
Regardless of the severity of the situation... observing their confused expressions had really been quite fun.  
  
'Should I get captured more often?'  
  
Cassie did her best to remain calm, entertaining herself with such thoughts.  
  
Helie and her were quickly separated. She gave her account of what had happened, mentioning Jest and his plot to have her killed — giving an explanation of why she was defecting that Helie could corroborate. There was not a word of lie in what Cassie told them.  
  
Of course, she omitted the real reason why she had decided to seek shelter in the embrace of the Great Clan Song, making the entire tale a deception.  
  
Truth was funny that way, sometimes.  
  
There was no telling if the Song sisters believed her. Helie was welcomed quite well, at least... that was a relief. It seemed that the Queen still held some affection for her old mentor, Master Orum —enough so to spare his niece, if nothing else.  
  
But the same benevolence did not extend to Cassie. Clan Song was wary of her, and so, she was treated as a prisoner, not as a guest.  
  
...An important prisoner, at least.  
  
That was just what Cassie had expected. When Seishan hastily arrived from the Greater Crossing to take her away in secret, Cassie was not surprised, either.  
  
The Lost Princess of Song looked just as elegant and graceful as ever, but honestly, she had lost some of her luster. Nobody would go so far as to call her appearance ragged, and yet the signs of fatigue and mental exhaustion were nothing short of evident.  
  
Well, it was understandable... she was the commander in charge of defending the Greater Crossing Stronghold, after all, having resisted none other than Nephis for weeks. Knowing who her enemy was, it seemed like a miracle that Seishan was even able to stand upright.  
  
Cassie could understand, but she was still surprised. She still vividly remembered how Seishan was on the Forgotten Shore — granted, back then, all Cassie knew was her refined, husky voice... and the faint scent of blood that seemed to follow Seishan wherever she went.  
  
Seishan had never lost the smallest bit of her refinement then.  
  
But it was different now.  
  
"Cassia."  
  
The voice was still the same.  
  
The scent of blood was much stronger, though... not that anyone but Cassie could smell it.  
  
Now that Seishan entered, the guards stationed outside could not see her anymore, and therefore, Cassie could not see her either. She released her mark and sighed, feeling like she had returned to the past.  
  
The voice and the scent were all that remained.  
  
Cassie had been kept in a tent on the edges of the Lesser Crossing encampment, away from prying eyes. The tent was small and flimsy, barely dimming the radiance of the cloudy sky. The clasp had been tightly shut, as well, so the heat inside was nearly unbearable.  
  
No one had brought her food or water, either. She was not too hungry yet, but the thirst was dreadful.  
  
'Am I being tortured, already?'  
  
Cassie opened her mouth and said — or rather, croaked:  
  
"I greet Princess Seishan."  
  
There were a few moments of silence, and then the husky voice asked:  
  
"What are you scheming now?"  
  
Cassie was more sensitive to voices than most people. To her, they were like a painting that brimmed with vivid color, hiding countless nuances. Seishan's voice was calm, collected, strong... but not harsh. Instead, it was soft, refined, and elegant.  
  
But behind it all, obscured by the more beautiful colors, there was a different hue. A subtle note of tiredness, tinged with a speck of disillusionment and apprehension.  
  
Mundane people saw Saints as demigods, but Saints were people, too. They were not immune to the shocking hоrrors of Godgrave... even someone as impervious to shock and trauma as Seishan, who had endured a decade of the Forgotten Shore, could not escape the dread of war unscathed.  
  
Cassie smiled faintly.  
  
"Would you believe me if I said that I am scheming to kill both Sovereigns and replace them with someone better?"  
  
Her own voice was hoarse and ugly due to thirst and mistreatment.  
  
But every word was carefully chosen and calculated. Seishan was right to assume that Cassie had a hidden motive to enter the camp of the Song Army... however, her scheme had nothing to do with taking action.  
  
Instead, it was all about talking.  
  
Seishan remained silent for a while, then chuckled.  
  
"You can barely speak. That won't do... guards! Bring our esteemed guest some refreshments."  
  
Then, her garments rustled quietly as she walked over to a folding chair and sat down.  
  
"Someone better, you say... why, I have no doubt that you believe Changing Star to be a better option. I do not doubt that she has no shortage of splendid ambitions, either. However, I also know why the two of you lowered your heads to Valor and have been biding your time, serving them as loyal dogs for all these years."  
  
She seemed to have leaned forward a little.  
  
"It is because no matter how you seаrched and how much you prepared, you've found no way to actually defeat one Sovereign, let alone two. Something like that is outside the realm of possibility, so stop playing games. What are you really after?"  
  
Cassie tried to laugh, but her throat was so parched that she convulsed in a coughing fit, instead.  
  
"...Alright. You saw right through me."  
  
Seishаn waited for a bit, then asked incгedulously:  
  
"That's it? You're not going to say anything else?"  
  
Cassie considered her answer carefully. While she was doing that, there was the sound of the tent entrance opening, and her mouth watered at the smell of food.  
  
Seishan sent the guard away.  
  
"Help yourself so that we could speak comfortably. Oh... I hope you'll be satisfied with a humble meal, Lady Cassia. It's just basic military rations and some wine — supply situations have been rough for us, as of late. Thanks to you and your sellsword Saint."  
  
Cassie smiled faintly.  
  
Seeing that she did not move, Seishan asked:  
  
"Do you need help?"  
  
Cassie pursed her lips, then shook her head.  
  
"I can do it myself."  
  
Activating her Awakened Ability, she walked over to the table and picked up a carafe of wine. The wine was watered down, of course, serving as something to satiate one's thirst rather than to lighten one's mood.  
  
Careful not to topple anything with her chains, Cassie poured herself some and brought the goblet to her lips.  
  
The faint scent of blood emanating from Seishan was almost overpowering at such a close distance, but she was too thirsty to care about such things.  
  
Cassie drank deeply, feeling the cold and fragrant liquid soothe her throat.  
  
'Ah...'  
  
Lowering the goblet, she swayed slightly and turned to face Seishan.  
  
"...You put something in the wine, didn't you?"  
  
Seishan chuckled.  
  
"I did."  
  
Cassie exhaled slowly.  
  
She had expected something like that, as well.