2183 Drops of Poison  
  
Cassie did not know what Seishan had mixed into the wine, but the effect was truly sinister.  
  
She felt dazed, as if her head was spinning — even though it wasn't. Her body felt overly sensitive, but at the same time sluggish and hard to control. She could just barely prevent herself from swaying while taking a step.  
  
It was almost as if she was drunk.  
  
Actually, Cassie would not know, since she had never been drunk before. She had not tasted alcohol prior to becoming an Awakened, and later, her body was too resilient to be intoxicated easily. The memories of those under the influences of substances were usually jumbled and confusing, too, while her Ascended Abilitу only granted her access to the mark's senses, not their mind.  
  
So, she could only imagine.  
  
If that was what being drunk felt like... she wanted none of it.  
  
'Ah. How vile'.  
  
Much worse than her dazed condition was the fact that her soul was in the same state — that was why the strangе drug Seishan had made her drink was so startling and sinister.  
  
Cassie could barely control her Aspect. In fact, she was not sure if she could control it at all... trying to activate her Aspect Abilities made her dizzy, and the input she received from them was fragmented at best, and unreliable at worst.  
  
She could not get a grasp on her essence, either, which now flowed freely and refused to follow her will.  
  
She could not even pull on her tether and return to the waking world. It was still there, somewhere in her soul... presumably. But she could not sense it.  
  
'How insidious.'  
  
The royal clan of the Sword Domain possessed deep knowledge of runic sorcery and had many capable craftsmen. So, it was no surprise that they could create restraints capable of imprisoning Awakened, Ascended, and even Saints — like the cage in the Night Temple where she had nearly died in solitude, or the cell where Master Orum was kept, interrogated, and eventually killed.  
  
Clan Song was not ignorant of runic sorcery, of course, but their attainments were much more modest. Ki Song had not risen to prominence until the first great Awakened fаmilies were already deeply established, after all, so her clan's foundation was shallow in comparison.  
  
Nevertheless, it seemed that Song had their own ways of solving problems.  
  
Cassie did not know what kind of mystical poison she had ingested, but its effects were in no way inferior to a cage created by the runesmiths of Clan Valor. In fact, in some aspects, it was even superior.  
  
For one, she could be freely moved.  
  
Seishan had given her just enough time to finish the meal, then immediately took her away from the Lesser Crossing. She also put a bag over Cassie's head — quite unceremoniously, at that.  
  
Obviously, the bag was not meant to obscure her vision. Cassie was blind, and now that she could not use her Aspect, she was almost as helpless as a mundane blind person would be. The bag was meant to prevent other people from looking at her, instead.  
  
After all, Cassie was supposed to be dead. Clan Song might have been wary of her schemes, but they saw the advantage of maintaining that part of her deceit, at least.  
  
The bag was a simple, but adequate tool of keeping her identity hidden. That said, it did not smell too good and quickly turned into an oven under the radiant light of Godgrave, making it hard for her to breathe.  
  
Cassie endured the discomfort in silence.  
  
Judging by the scent, the sound, and the subtle presence... Seishan had arrived on the back of a Nightmare Creature enthralled by Beastmaster. Now, both of them were standing on its carapace as the creature ran across the bone plain.  
  
They were probably heading to the Greater Crossing Stronghold, where Cassie would have an audience with the Queen.  
  
The Western First Rib, where the Lesser Crossing was located, was not too far from the Greater Crossing. However, there was a great difference in elevation between them, as well as a wide abyss. So, in order to ascend to the Collarbone Plain, one had to travel west, use a series of elevators constructed by Clan Song, and then return east.  
  
The Nightmare Creature was swift, but it would still take them a long time to reach its destination... or so Cassie had thought before the beast leapt, and she was suddenly overcome by a sense of weightlessness. Then, the carapace moved beneath her, and she heard a loud rustling sound, as if a dragonfly was beating its wings.  
  
'We're flying.'  
  
So, that was how Seishan had arrived so soon.  
  
Cassie had less time than she had hoped for.  
  
After remaining silent for a while, she spoke:  
  
"How many of your Handmaidens died in this war?"  
  
Seishan seemed to turn her head, studying her.  
  
Eventually, she answered neutrally:  
  
"Two."  
  
There was a short pause, and she added with the smallest hint of reluctance in her voice:  
  
"...It would have been three, if not fоr Nephis."  
  
Cassie smiled bitterly.  
  
"I lost seven of my Fire Keepers."  
  
She wondered how her own voice sounded, muffled by the thick bag.  
  
"Well, at least none of your sisters died. You are lucky."  
  
Seishan remained silent for a while.  
  
"You are wrong."  
  
Cassie raised an eyebrow, then remembered that Seishan could not see her face.  
  
Was that how people felt when they spoke to her?  
  
"What do you mean?"  
  
Finally, Seishan's voice betrayed a bitter feeling, becoming painted by a much darker palette of emotions than the vibrant splendor of her usual hues.  
  
"I have more sisters than people tend to remember. None of the seven of us who had reached Transcendence died. But that doesn't mean that we lost no one."  
  
Cassie remained silent for a while, pretending to be surprised by the news.  
  
...Of course, she knew how many adopted daughters Ki Song had, what their Ranks were, and which of them had perished in the war.  
  
Seishan seemed to think that Cassie's goal was to gain an audience with the Queen, for whatever reason — perhaps to strike a deal, or maybe even try something daring and unwise.  
  
But she was wrong.  
  
Cassie did want to speak with the Queen, but her true target... was already in her grasp.  
  
It was Seishan herself.  
  
Seishan had put something in her drink, and Cassie was returning the favor.  
  
Every carefully chosen word she spoke was a drop of poison.  
  
She just had to be subtle about it, so that her target remained none the wiser... and so that by the time her poison took hold, it was already too late to administer an antidote.  
  
Cassie's goal in the camp of the Song Army was to turn the daughters of Ki Song against their mother, removing them from her Domain when the time to choose sides came.