2184 The Other Side  
  
After some time, the Nightmare Creature landed. Cassie was in such a poor state that she almost rolled off its carapace — luckily, Seishan extended a hand to catch her.  
  
As they descended from the beast's back, Cassie could feel the solid surface of the ancient bone under her feet once more. The bone was the same, and the heat was the same... but the wind was different.  
  
That was because they weren't on the First Rib anymore, and thus were not shielded from the winds rolling down the slopes of the Hollow Mountains anymore. They had arrived on the Collarbone Plain.  
  
The Great Crossing Stronghold — and the Queen of Worms — had to be close now.  
  
Which meant that this could very well be Cassie's last chance to talk to Seishan. However, she remained silent, knowing that being too obvious would only be harmful. The seeds she wanted to plant had already been planted... the soil was already made rich by the senseless war.  
  
Now, all she had to do was wait for the rains to come, and see the seеds she had sown sprout to life.  
  
...Hopefully.  
  
Another reason why Cassie remained silent was that, soon enough, they were surrounded by the sound of steps. She shivered, suddenly overcome by an eerie sense of incongruity... because those steps sounded like they were made by humans, and yet, there were no other subtle sounds that humans always made to accompany them.  
  
No breathing. No heartbeat. No rustle of clothes or scraping of armor from the small gestures people usually made.  
  
'Pilgrims.'  
  
Dozens of pilgrims gathered around them, serving as a silent escort.  
  
Surrounded by the dead from all sides, Cassie was led across the bone plain by Seishan.  
  
Step. Step. Another step.  
  
Her chains rattled quietly.  
  
Soon enough, a nearly overwhelming sea of sounds and smells washed over her, and Cassie realized that they were nearing the Greater Crossing Stronghold.  
  
'I made such a long journey... just to end up so close to where I had started.'  
  
Beyond the fortress built from the bones of a Great Demon lay the chasm, and beyond the chasm, across a stretch of battered bone, lay the siege camp of the Sword Army. The Ivory Island was right above it, drifting between the corpse of a dead god and the annihilating sky.  
  
Nephis was so close, but also so impossibly distant.  
  
This small distance — the two army camps, the fortress wall, and the dark chasm — was perhaps the hardest piece of land to cross in all of human history.  
  
Cassie sighed as they entered the vast courtyard of the stronghold. It sounded and smelled almost exactly like the siege camp of the Sword Army, except for the fact that there was the ghastly scent of Nightmare Creatures added to the mix here, as well.  
  
Almost as if the people on the opposite sides of the chasm were exactly the same, and had no real reason to be divided into two warring armies.  
  
As Cassie walked through the camp of the Song Army, surrounded by pilgrims, the strange procession inevitably drew attention. However, no one could see her well behind the barrier of walking corpses.  
  
Still...  
  
One of Sunny's incarnations was somewhere here. He had to be watching, no doubt.  
  
She hoped that he would not do anything hasty.  
  
Cassie shifted her hands slightly, causing the chains to rattle. Her fingers moved, but nobody who saw it would have been able to read the signal she was giving.  
  
Because she wasn't using her fingers to relay the message.  
  
Instead, it was their shadow that formed a simple sign.  
  
'I am alright.'  
  
She hoped he sensed it.  
  
Now that everything was at stake, each of them had their part to play. Cassie had alreаdy done everything she could, except for this one final task. That was what she had to concentrate on, trusting in Nephis and Sunny to finish the job.  
  
Nothing else mattered.  
  
"Am I going to see the Queen now?"  
  
Seishan answered dryly:  
  
"Yes."  
  
Cassie took a deep breath, wondering what Ki Song was like.  
  
Was she still like the little girl she had seen in Orum's memories? The young woman who had been left all alone in the cruel world, seeking vengeance against those who had betrayed her mother and stole her inheritance? The confident leader who led her people to prosperity despite great adversity?  
  
Or were all traces of Ki Song Master Orum had known erased by time, with only the cold and ruthless visage of the Raven Queen left in her wake?  
  
Cassie hesitated.  
  
"Any advice?"  
  
The question seemed comical, but who else could she ask if not Seishan? Ki Song was her mother, after all.  
  
Strangely enough, Seishan lingered with the answer.  
  
"Why are you asking me?"  
  
Cassie smiled secretly, pleased.  
  
"You are one of her daughters, after all. Is there someone who understands her better?"  
  
Seishan scoffed.  
  
"Why should I help an enemy of Clan Song understand her?"  
  
Cassie sighed in dejection.  
  
"An enemy? Oh my. You were calling me an esteemed guest just earlier..."  
  
But she wasn't really disappointed. The response did not really matter. The questions themselves were more important.  
  
Nevertheless, unexpectedly, Seishan did give her an answer.  
  
"I won't presume to understand my mother. But... she has been lonely, I think. She must be, since there is no one around her who isn't either her servant or her responsibility. In that sense, an enemy is much more precious."  
  
She paused for a moment, and then added:  
  
"...Misuse this information, and I will kill you."  
  
Cassie smiled darkly, suppressing a sigh.  
  
Seishan must havе hoped that Cassie was attempting to strike a deal with her mother — and, therefore, Nephis was.  
  
But she was wrong.  
  
Nephis only intended to kill her mother, while at the same time hoping not to have to kill Seishan and her sisters in the aftermath.  
  
The Queen had to be dealt with, but slaying the Seven Princesses and destroying Clan Song would be a great loss. Having them fight for humanity in the future wаs a priceless luxury.  
  
It all depended on whether Seishan and her sisters could be reasoned with after their mother fell.  
  
'What a mess.'  
  
Cassie did not know where they arrived, but could feel a cool shadow falling over her.  
  
Then, there was the sound of a heavy gate opening, and she was led away from the unbearable heat into a chillingly cold space.  
  
Her audience with the Queen was about to start.