2185 Ravensong  
  
Seishan led Cassie into the depths of the cold structure. The deeper they went and the more gates they passed, the colder it became, until Cassie could not help but shiver.  
  
Eventually, complete silence enveloped them.  
  
'Where is she?'  
  
Although Cassie was in a strange state and couldn't really control her Aspect, her Dormant Ability was still working — even if it was much more difficult to understand what it was telling her than usual. So, she was curious to see what the runes would tell her about the Queen.  
  
Chances were they were going to tell her very little, since someone as powerful as Ki Song would without a doubt have protected herself against curious diviners. Still, she hoped to learn something.  
  
Seishan placed a hand on Cassie's shoulder, forcing her to stop, then pressed down gently. Cassie had no choice but to kneel.  
  
The bag was taken off her head.  
  
She could not hear anything, she could not smell anything. Her Dormant Ability seemed to hint that there was no one in front of her.  
  
And yet, she felt it... a deep, profound presence that seemed to drown the entire world. As if there was an immense, ancient, terrifying beast hiding in the darkness right in front of her.  
  
Struggling against her dazed mind, Cassie reached toward the mark she had left on Seishan and activated it.  
  
Perhaps because they were so close, or perhaps purely by luck, she actually managed to maintain a tenuous hold on her Ascended Ability, this time...  
  
And shuddered.  
  
Looking through Seishan's eyes, she could finally see where they were.  
  
A large stone chamber surrounded them, full of shadows. Cold light was pouring from high above, illuminating a lonesome stone throne.  
  
A breathtakingly beautiful woman was sitting on the throne, her red gown spilling over its steps like a river of blood. Her skin was pale as that of a corpse, and her hair was like a stream of impenetrable, lustrous darkness.  
  
A faint smile was playing on her tantalizing lips, and her eyes were, were...  
  
Mesmerizing... but at the same time eerie and disturbing. There was a hint of emptiness and distance about them, like that of someone who was long dead.  
  
She was the source of the wild, overwhelming, bestial presence Cassie had sensed.  
  
If Anvil's presence was heavy and oppressive, then Ki Song's presence was subtle — and more frightening for it. Cassie felt fear grasp her heart with icy claws.  
  
It was the ancient, primal fear that all living beings felt in the presence of a superior predator.  
  
Two youths — a boy and a girl — were standing at either side of the throne, staring into the distance with empty eyes.  
  
It took Cassie a few moments to realize that neither of them was alive.  
  
No...  
  
None of the three were.  
  
Because the breathtaking woman sitting on the throne was, without a doubt, dead too.  
  
Shaking off her shock, Cassie shivered and bowed deeply.  
  
"Greetings, Your Majesty."  
  
The dead woman turned her head slightlу and looked at her, making Cassie's entire body tremble against her will.  
  
Ki Song did not speak. Instead, the dead bоy standing to her left opened his mouth and said in a clear voice:  
  
"Song of the Fallen..."  
  
Almost at the same time, the dead girl spoke as well:  
  
"...I've been curious to meet you."  
  
Cassie tried to calm her wildly beating heart and straightened her back, facing the dead woman on the throne.  
  
'There is nothing.'  
  
Her Dormant Ability did not show her anything, as if there was no one in front of her at all. Almost as if...  
  
Her expressions changed.  
  
"You... are a puppet."  
  
The Queen leaned back on the throne, while the dead girl laughed melodiously.  
  
Cassie barely prevented herself from swaying. Her thoughts became tangled.  
  
Ki Song — her original body — was merely a puppet, just like the two youths and the rest of her pilgrims. She was nothing but a dead body animated by the power of her Aspect.  
  
Then where was her true vessel?  
  
Cassie ρursed her lips.  
  
"I am not sure that we've really met then, Your Majesty. If I may be so bold as to ask... where is the real you?"  
  
Ki Song looked at her with a smile. The boy answered:  
  
"Everywhere."  
  
Cassie shuddered.  
  
'Everywhere...'  
  
She understood what the Queen meant instinctually. It was not that any of her dead puppets could serve as the vessel of her soul... it was that all of them were the vessel, and she existed everywhere the myriads of her pilgrims were, always, all at once.  
  
Which meant that in order to kill the Raven Queen... one would have to eradicate all of her countless puppets, no matter where they were.  
  
How were Nephis and Sunny meant to do that?  
  
Cassie remained silent for a while.  
  
Eventually, she exhaled slowly.  
  
"Аll across Godgrave, your puppets are with the soldiers of thе Song Army. They are the first to attack, and the first ones to be cut down. That means that you have fought a thousand battles, Your Majesty, and were killed ten thousand times."  
  
Ki Song — the puppet made from her original body — tilted her head.  
  
"...A million battles. Ten million deaths."  
  
Whenever she wanted to speak, one of the two dead youths would do it in her stead. Two clear voices would harmonize at times, then separate again, making it seem like countless people were talking.  
  
Cassie gathered her courage.  
  
She hesitated for a few long moments, then said:  
  
"I was with Master Orum when he died. I glimpsed his memories."  
  
Ki Song lowered her head, her expression betraying a hint of melancholy for a fleeting moment.  
  
"Uncle Orie..."  
  
A subtle sigh escaped from her enchanting lips.  
  
But that hint of emotion was gone in an instant, replaced by inhuman composure.  
  
"What about it?"  
  
Cassie took a deep breath.  
  
"He was your teacher, was he not? He asked the students of the Academy once about what the essence of combat was. Your answer... was failure. You said that if someone is forced to fight, they have already failed."  
  
Ki Song looked at her curiously.  
  
"So what if I did?"  
  
Cassie smiled darkly.  
  
"Why this war, then? Is it not the greatest failure one can imagine?"  
  
The Queen remained silent for a few moments.  
  
Then, both of the dead youths laughed brightly, their clear voices fusing together flawlessly.  
  
When their laughter grew quiet, the dead girl spoke:  
  
"Of course, it is. I thought that would be self-evident."