2186 Master of Puppets  
  
Cassie remained silent for a few moments.  
  
'Self-evident…'  
  
Was that the answer she had expected? Or the opposite of it? She was not sure, since Ki Song —the Raven Queen — was a nebulous existence. She was much more reticent and withdrawn than Anvil, ruling the Song Domain from the depths of her obsidian palace.  
  
Who knew what was on her mind?  
  
Cassie smiled faintly.  
  
"If you see the war as failure, why did you start it?"  
  
The dead queen studied her quietly, then sighed.  
  
"Are you really in the position to ask me questions, Song of the Fallen?"  
  
There was no particular threat in her voice, but Cassie shivered.  
  
What position was she in?  
  
Blind, stripped of her Aspect, driven to her knees, and at the mercy of her captors... it was hard to imagine someone more powerless.  
  
And yet, that was exactly where Cassie wanted to be. That was the position from which she was planning to break the Song Domain.  
  
But Ki Song did not have to know that.  
  
Cassie raised her chin slightly.  
  
"I guess I am not. However, I know a lot of secrets... one of them in particular would be of great value to Your Majesty."  
  
Ki Song raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Oh? You want to barter with me..."  
  
Before the dead boy even finished speaking, the dead girl laughed.  
  
Then, both of them abruptly grew silent.  
  
The Queen looked at Cassie coldly, making her heart beat like a bird trapped in a cage.  
  
"But I don't need to pay. Any secret you have, I can simply take."  
  
She raised a hand in a fluid, elegant motion...  
  
And at the same time, Cassie's own hand rose, mirroring what Ki Song had done.  
  
She turned her head, studying it in horror.  
  
"Y—you... you..."  
  
The Queen smiled coldly.  
  
"You have drunk of my blood. Now, you are my puppet. You will do as I command, whether you like it or not."  
  
Cassie struggled to suppress the trembling that had overwhelmed her body. She failed to do so, so Ki Song did it for her. As her slendeг hand turned into a fist, Cassie's body grew motionless.  
  
Only her eyes, hidden by the blindfold, were moving erratically.  
  
'...I see. Makes sense.'  
  
So what Seishan had mixed into the wine was not poison, but a drop of Ki Song's blood. And now, the Queen could control Cassie's body like a marionette... her soul as well, at least to some degree.  
  
But not to an absolute degree. Otherwise, Cassie would not have access to her Aspect at all.  
  
'Does she control her daughters the same way, I wonder?'  
  
If so, that would be a problem.  
  
However, Cassie did not think that that was the case.  
  
Firstly, because she had perceived the Queen's daughters with her Dormant Ability. If they had been turned into puppets, she would have learned it then.  
  
Second of all... it was simply because Ki Song and her adopted daughters, ironically enough, resembled a normal family much more than Anvil and his biological children did.  
  
The Queen actually cared about Seishan and her sisters. Therefore, she would not have done something so terrible and violating to them.  
  
Cassie tried to regain her composure.  
  
After a few long moments, she opened her mouth and said slowly:  
  
"I've been meaning to ask... how come your puppets don't rot? It was somewhat possible to explain in Ravenheart, where it's usually cold. But here in Godgrave, the heat is terrible. And yet, there is no stench."  
  
The insult in her words was not even that hidden.  
  
The Queen studied her for a moment, then chuckled.  
  
"Insolent girl."  
  
A moment later, Cassie's hand rose on its own and dug into her cheek, leaving four deep cuts on it.  
  
Red blood splattered on the floor, and Cassie bit her lips to suppress a groan.  
  
Ki Song could have punished her much more thoroughly, but did not seem inclined to do that... yet.  
  
Instead, he gestured to herself.  
  
"To satisfy your curiosity, my puppets don't rot because they are under my control. If I want to make them rot, they will..."  
  
At her words, the beautiful woman on the throne suddenly changed. Black spоts appeared on her flawless skin, swiftly turning into revolting pustules. Her skin sagged, as if the muscles beneath were disappearing. Her beautiful hair turned bleak and brittle before falling off her scalp in clumps.  
  
In a matter of seconds, the corpse went through various stages of decomposition, until a hideous mummy was left sitting on the throne.  
  
The mummy calmly lowered her hand, and one of the two dead youths spoke:  
  
"...and if I want them to stay as they were, they won't."  
  
Then, as Cassie watched with a sense of trepidation, the body of Ki Song changed once more. This time, the process of decomposition seemed to happen in reverse, and seconds later, she was once again whole and breathtakingly beautiful.  
  
The Queen's crimson lips twisted into a mesmerizing smile.  
  
"There are different levels of mastery to puppetry, you see. And I have mastered them all."  
  
Cassie shivered, suddenly realizing that Ki Song was not merely limited to controlling the movements of her puppets. No... her control went much deeper than that.  
  
Which meant that if the Queen so wished, she could make Cassie's own body rot and decompose, as well.  
  
'That... would be a new nightmare, even for me.'  
  
Ki Song grew silent for a while, looking at Cassie with a distant look.  
  
Then, she sighed.  
  
Her sigh was immaculately natural — to a degree that Cassie could not truly believe that she was looking at a puppeteered corpse that did not even need to breathe, not of a living woman.  
  
Every little detail was flawless. The posture, the slight tilt of her head, the smallest facial expression... it was hard to believe that Ki Song was controlling every tiny muscle in her body consciously to produce the illusion of natural life. She had not just mastered all levels of puppeteering — she was an artist.  
  
The Queen shook her head elegantly, and then said using the dead girl's mouth:  
  
"In truth, this war of ours was inevitable."  
  
Her gaze turned a little distant.  
  
"It was set in stone the moment Smile of Heaven died…"