2194 Price of Divinity  
  
Ki Song inhaled deeply — or pretended to, at least — and leaned back.  
  
"As for conquering the Fifth Nightmare... even if we have such an ambition, neither of us dares. Challenging a Nightmare is always a gamble, after all — maybe the challenger will return alive, maybe not. Immortal Flame could risk his life because there were countless Awakened in the world beside him. Warden and Nightwalker could risk theirs because, by then, there were plenty of Masters around. But what about us? What happens if all Supremes of humanity perish together, leaving no one to defend it against the tyranny of the Nightmare Spell? The risk is too great, and the responsibility we bear is too great to take it."  
  
Her expression changed subtly.  
  
"More than that, each Nightmare is different from the previous one. We have no knowledge about what awaits us in the Fifth. What we do know, however... is that even if one manages to conquer it, there will be a price to pay. A Sacred being won't be able to enter the waking world at all, most likely, meaning that there won't be Dream Gates to lead people away either. Even if Sacred carriers of the Nightmare Spell receive an ability to create a new kind of connection between the two worlds, there is also the nature of the Apotheosis itself to consider. Becoming a god... is not merely about one's Rank."  
  
Ki Song paused briefly and continued in a neutral tone:  
  
"The difference between a Transcendent and a Supreme is vast. However, the difference between a mortal and a god is immeasurable. Becoming a Sacred being means leaving what little remains of your human nature behind. Once one experiences Apotheosis, the way they think will changе. The way they feel will change. The way they are will change, and who they are will change as well. Power and benevolence do not always go hand-in-hand... who knows if a Sacred being can even be entrusted with humanity? Heavens know I dread the thought of the Dreamspawn becoming a god. Anvil, as well... and I fear myself most of all."  
  
The Queen remained silent for a while, then looked at Seishan hesitantly.  
  
Her lips moved slightly, and a new voice — Ki Song's own voice — resounded in the throne room for the first time.  
  
It was low and beautiful, making one want to never stop hearing it.  
  
"Will I still care about my daughters? Will I even be capable of human affection? Will I remain... myself? Or will I become someone else — something else, rather. A being whose very nature is divine, and thus inhuman."  
  
Seishan trembled.  
  
The Queen's words sounded eerily similar to what Cassie herself had been considering earlier, and they resounded strongly.  
  
Because Cassie herself was deathly afraid of losing herself to the power of her Aspect. Countless fragments of her past were already lost, and so, she dreaded losing even more of her present self... but she was afraid of her future self most of all.  
  
Everyone feared death, and transformation, especially one as thorough as becoming a deity — Apotheosis, as Ki Song had called it — was a form of death as well.  
  
Cassie took a deep breath.  
  
"So, in the end... the two of you started this war to consume each other and give birth to an immensely powerful Domain — one that unites all of humanity — as a result. The part of humanity that you had deemed worthy of saving, at least."  
  
Ki Song shrugged.  
  
She had grown silent again, and her puppets spoke in her stead:  
  
"Yes. Something like that."  
  
Cassie shook her head.  
  
"All these deaths, all this suffering... wouldn't it have been easier if one of you simply stepped down and allowed the other to rule unopposed?"  
  
A strange smile twisted the Queen's alluring lips.  
  
"I suppose it would have. But ask yourself this question... will someone who is willing to give up without a fight be capable of standing up against the entire world? Will someone who is willing to submit without a struggle be worthy of ruling over all of humanity? Will someone like that be able to lead anyone, let alone everyone, to salvation? No... it is not in the nature of a Sovereign to surrender. The very quality that made us Supreme makes it impossible for us to capitulate without a thorough battle."  
  
There was a long strеtch of silence, and then, the dead youths laughed.  
  
"Well... I seem to have answered all of your question, Song of the Fallen. How's that? Was that enough for a barter?"  
  
Cassie lowered her head.  
  
"...It's plenty, Your Majesty."  
  
Ki Song nodded with a hint of amusement.  
  
"I've shown you plenty of grace, then. What do I get in exchange?"  
  
Cassie gathered her thoughts while inhaling deeply.  
  
'Here it goes, then.'  
  
Things would start happening fast once she opened her mouth. But that was the best course of action...  
  
The Sovereigns had to be somewhat equal in strength when they clashed. And at the moment, the King of Swords was holding too big of an advantage.  
  
She sighed.  
  
"I mentioned knowing a lot of secrets, one of which is especially valuable. I'll share it with you as gratitude for showing me grace."  
  
Straightening her back, Cassie lingered for a moment and then said in a somber tone:  
  
"Thе King has secretly carved a path through the Hollows of the Breastbone and the Western First Rib. His troops will soon emerge from the jungle and attack the Lesser Stronghold Crossing from the rear — it will happen by the end of tomorrow, or perhaps even sooner. Now that Valor wants me dead, my life is tied to the well-being of the Song clan. So, I thought I'd let you know."  
  
A heavy silence settled in the throne room. Seishan seemed startled, her eyes widening slightly... the Queen, however, remained composed.  
  
A few moments later, she leaned forward a little.  
  
"...Weren't there a Cursed Tyrant barring the path to the Hollows of the First Rib?"  
  
Cassie lowered her head.  
  
"There was. The King killed it."  
  
Ki Song raised an eyebrow.  
  
"He killed a Cursed Tyrant swiftly and quietly enough for its death to go unnoticed? Ah... how curious."  
  
She remained motionless for a while. And then smiled.  
  
"Well. That certainly changes things..."