2198 Divide and Conquer  
  
Just a handful of minutes before, Sunny was standing at the edge of the Ivory Island, looking at the distant wall of the great fortress with a somber expression on his face. His incarnation in the camp of the Song Army had caught a glimpse of Cassie as she was being escorted by Seishan and their eerie retinue of walking corpses...  
  
But he had lost sight of them once the two entered the chambers of the Queen. Sunny was not reckless enough to get that close to Ki Song, so he was forced to wait in tense anticipation, not knowing what to expect.  
  
Surely, Cassie was too valuable to be disposed of swiftly. She was not someone who would put herself in danger without having a way out, either... so his worry was most likely meaningless. And yet, he could not help but feel uneasy.  
  
'Damn it.'  
  
Eventually, Cassie emerged from the heavy gates and remained standing outside, motionless and silent. There were fresh cuts on her cheek, but it did not seem like she was hurt badly. The lack of an escort was also telling, hinting that she had come to some sort of understanding with the Queen.  
  
Or that the Queen simply did not deem it necessary to guard her, confident that Cassie would not be able to escape.  
  
The mental communication Sunny had grown used to did not seem to work, so he wanted to approach the blind seer stealthily in the form of a shadow to exchange a few audible words. However, she shook her head lightlу, which had to be a signal to stay away.  
  
Tense and unhappy, Sunny retreated.  
  
And not long after that, the camp of the Song Army came alive like a massive beast awakening from slumber.  
  
The sudden commotion was on such a grand scale that even Master Sunless could see that something was going on in the Greater Crossing Stronghold, all the way from the Ivory Island.  
  
He frowned.  
  
"Are they preparing to retreat?"  
  
Cassie could have informed Ki Song about the clandestine plan to attack the Lesser Crossing Stronghold from the rear — in fact, she had a good reason to. If so, the main contingent of the Song Army serving as the garrison of the Greater Crossing would have to retreat or risk being cut off from the base camp and surrounded by the forces of the Sword Domain.  
  
They could even make a desperate attempt to reinforce the Lesser Crossing and prevent it from falling...  
  
But that was not what Ki Song had decided to do.  
  
When Sunny's incarnation learned what the Queen was planning a few moments later, he could not help but falter for a moment.  
  
Master Sunless opened his eyes wide.  
  
"...Crazy!"  
  
Everyone had expected that Ki Song would retreat.  
  
But against all odds, she decided to attack instead.  
  
She was preparing to abandon the Greater Crossing Stronghold and throw all her available forces into an all-out offensive, threatening to break the main contingent of the Sword Army in one fell swoop.  
  
Why would she surrender the overwhelming defensive advantage the Song Army held and command her soldiers to attack, even knowing how desperate her position was? Was she insane or a genius?  
  
Sunny suddenly felt cold sweat rolling down his back.  
  
In hindsight... why wouldn't she attack?  
  
Retreating would only buy the Song Aгmy some time — granted, time was what they lacked the most — but it would not change the overall situation of the war by much.  
  
However, now that she knew that Anvil had secretly left the siege camp and was leading soldiers through the Hollows, she would also know that the siege camp was not as impossible to overtake as everyone seemed to believe. As far as she was informed, the Lord of Shadows was also far away.  
  
So, the greatest obstacle in her way was Nephis.  
  
Nephis had proven that she was an impossible existence among those of the Transcendent Rank, and therеfore, no Saint in the Song Army could defeat her. If the Queen wanted to destroy the siege camp, she would have to take to the battlefield herself — which she could not do, not yet.  
  
Or rather, there had not been any other way to suppress Nephis before.  
  
There was one now, though.  
  
Cursing, Sunny dove into the shadows and stepped out of them at the top of the Ivory Tower. Nephis was already walking toward the balcony, a cold expression on her face.  
  
"Cassie! She's..."  
  
Nephis nodded.  
  
"I know."  
  
She paused for a moment near him, hesitated a little, and then said casually:  
  
"Stay here, please. Make sure that your assistant, Aiko, remains in the Brilliant Emporium as well. I don't know what will happen next, but... it can get messy."  
  
Sunny chewed on his lip, unhappy.  
  
But it was not time to discard the persona of Master Sunless yet. Plus, if anything that disagreed with him happened, he would only be a step away. His senses could envelop the entire battlefield, after all, and there was one more of his incarnations on the other side of the chasm.  
  
He sighed.  
  
"Take one of my shadows with you, at least."  
  
As he said the words, the gloomy shadow separated from his feet and dove into Neph's own shadow... looking quite smug and satisfied as it did, at that.  
  
Nephis lingered for a moment, then smiled faintly.  
  
"Thank you, Master Sunless."  
  
Leaning forward, she planted a soft kiss on his cheek, and then turned around.  
  
Brilliant light surrounded her slender figure, forming into the image of two incandescent wings. A moment later, she leapt over the parapet of the balcony and plummeted down, toward the siege camp of the Sword Army.  
  
Left alone under the radiant sky, Sunny touched his cheek and looked into the distance.  
  
A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.  
  
"...Stay safe, Lady Nephis."  
  
The drums of war were beating, and she had to lead her soldiers into battle.  
  
That battle was not going to be an easy one, it seemed.  
  
Worse still, the battles that would follow it were only going to be so much harder...