2199 From the Ashes  
  
Setting an entire army into motion was not an easy task. As Sunny watched somberly from high above, the siege camp slowly became consumed by feverish activity.  
  
The soldiers were tired, having only recently returned from a bloody and fruitless assault on the impregnable walls of the great fortress. They wanted nothing more than to crawl into their tents and rest their weary bodies, surrendering to the fleeting and merciful escape of oblivion for a short while.  
  
The Awakened slept without seeing dreams, while Masters suffered in the embrace of nightmares.  
  
Instead of being given an opportunity to rest, though, they were being stirred awake and told to prepare for another battle. This time, it was not another dreadful assault... instead, the enemy was supposedly coming over the chasm to attack.  
  
The groggy soldiers could not make any sense of it. Why would the Song Army abandon its cursed fortress? The Greater Crossing Stronghold had become a dark symbol of death for the soldiers of the Sword Army, so they failed to imagine that the enemy would give up on the protection of its walls.  
  
Surely, there had been some mistake...  
  
But as they slowly came to their senses and realized the severity of the situation, their confusion was replaced with dread.  
  
Soon enough, the siege camp was boiling. The soldiers were assembling into units, and the units were trying to move into formation...  
  
But they were already far behind the Song Army, which seemed to be ready to march.  
  
"...What are they doing?"  
  
Most of the Fire Keepers were boarding the Chain Breaker, ready to join Nephis on the ground, while some remained on the Ivory Island to defend it should Beastmaster and her winged thralls stage another aerial attack. However, Aiko was entirely idle, keeping Sunny company as they observed the two armies from above.  
  
Sunny frowned, unsure how to answer. He was confused as well.  
  
"It seems like... they're dismantling the ramparts."  
  
Indeed, the walls of the Greater Crossing Stronghold, which had endured countless assaults and remained unbroken, were slowly crumbling in the distance.  
  
One section quaked, and then collapsed, followed by another. The soldiers swarmed over the wooden debris, appearing no larger than ants. Gaping holes were slowly forming in the once impenetrable shield of the Greater Crossing.  
  
Sunny was darkly fascinated by the view.  
  
He had seen so many people die trying to take these walls, and now, they were being destroyed from within by those who had spilled rivers of blood trying to defend them.  
  
'Why would they take down the walls?'  
  
He wanted to say something else, but at that moment, something else stole his attention.  
  
Looking into the darkness of the abyssal chasm separating the breastbone and the collarbone of the dead god, Sunny scowled deeply. A cold shiver ran down his spine.  
  
Something was moving there, far below... rising from under the ash.  
  
"Crap."  
  
His eyes widened a little.  
  
Аiko looked at him in confusion and opened her mouth to say something, but Sunny interrupted her in a tone that lacked his usual levity:  
  
"Go back, Aiko. Lock yourself inside the Brilliant Emporium and don't come out until I come get you."  
  
She flinched, surprised by the unfamiliar tone.  
  
After sparing him a long look, Aiko wordlessly turned around and shot toward the Mimic, her feet hovering slightly above the grass.  
  
The Fire Keepers preparing the Chain Breaker for the journey down seemed to have felt something, as well. A few of them grew motionless on the deck, turning to look in the direction of the great fortress.  
  
The troops wеre still trying to assemble into a battle formation down on the ground, and their movements grew even more urgent.  
  
A cold gust of wind blew across the Greater Crossing, bringing with it the smell of ash and the stench of rotting flesh.  
  
Sunny's expression became grim.  
  
Thеn, a moment later, something emerged from the darkness of the chasm.  
  
At first, it seemed like a thick vine — no different from the tendrils that the abominable jungle sprouted to crawl to the surface from the dim twilight of the Hollows. However, this one was grey, not scarlet.  
  
And it was not a vine... it was a living creature that resembled a giant worm — or rather, a puppet made from the creature's corpse, if Sunny's suspicion was correct.  
  
The worm was dozens of meters in length, with a strangely flat body that was smeared in ash. At the end of it, an appalling maw bristled with countless teeth, and just beneath them, circular suckers were like sores on the translucent skin of the beast.  
  
Those suckers adhered to the surface of the ancient bone, and the ash worm rоse above the edge of the chasm, its head swaying from side to side. As soon as the light of the radiant sky fell on it, hideous burns appeared on its skin, and wisps of smoke rose into the air.  
  
'Damnation.'  
  
One monstrous worm was not a problem, no matter how powerful it was. However, just a split second later, another one appeared, and another, and another...  
  
The ash worms were rising from the darkness, climbing both sides of the chasm. Soon, their grey body covered its walls, forming living, slithering strings.  
  
And countless figures emerged from the darkness, as well, climbing the strings of ash worms like ladders.  
  
Sunny shuddered.  
  
Throughout the siege of the Greater Crossing Stronghold, countless soldiers and enthralled abominations had perished. Some bodies were retrieved, but most plummeted into the dark depths, disappearing forever.  
  
He thought that they had become food to the harrowing creatures that dwelled in the ash covering the bottom of the chasm. But as it turned out, the ash dwellers became victims of the dead, instead.  
  
All that time, the Queen had been waging a secret war against the creatures of the ash. She won that war, and now, the fallen of the Greater Crossing Siege — all those countless victims whose lives had been snuffed out by the cruelty of war —were coming back to avenge themselves upon the living.  
  
A blood-crusted human hand crested the edge of the chasm, and a moment later, a disfigured corpse climbed from the darkness, smeared an ash.  
  
Empty eyes gazed upon the assembling army, and then glinted with murderous intent.  
  
The puppet took its first step toward the warriors of the Sword Domain.  
  
And countless others soon followed.  
  
'Damn, damn, damn...'