2201 Flowing Blood  
  
The Song Army faced the same hardship their enemy had faced during countless assaults on the great fortress in the past.  
  
There were no ramparts on the eastern side of the chasm, but the chasm itself remained — crossing it under the barrage of enemy arrows and launching an attack from the shaky bridges was a task that would thrust any strategist into despair, and Seishan was no different from Nephis in that regard.  
  
That was the purpose the tide of the ashen dead had served. While the Sword Army was distracted by repelling their ghastly attack, the garrison of the Greater Crossing Stronghold had time to brave the chasm.  
  
The besieging army had used war engines to shoot mighty steel cables over the abyssal gorge, which then served as supports to build hanging bridges. As time went on, the sappers improved and iterated upon both the war engines and the structure of the bridges, making them easier to raise and harder to bring down.  
  
The assaults started when the cables shot over the chasm, and ended when all bridges were destroyed.  
  
The Song Army, however, did not possess the war engines, and neither did they have a storied contingent of seasoned, crafty sappers to build them. They cut themselves from the other side of the chasm the moment they destroyed the original bridge that had connected Collarbone Plain to the Breastbone Reach in the past.  
  
That did not stop them today, though.  
  
While the pilgrims and the Sword Army clashed, the ash worms continued to crawl up the slopes of the chasm. Now that their bodies had already served their purpose and delivered the hidden army of puppets to the surface, they were free to move.  
  
The abominable creatures tangled with each other, fusing body to body with the help of their circular suckers. The seething mass of ashen flesh reached across the dark abyss, while more worms crawled across its surface to extend it further.  
  
There was one slithering tendril of ash worms rising from the eastern slope of the chasm and stretching west, and another rising from the western slope of the chasm, right below the gates of the great fortress, and stretching east.  
  
The two met above the darkness of the chasm, and merged together.  
  
Just then, the towering gates of the Greater Crossing Stronghold opened.  
  
Human soldiers poured from inside, followed by the thralls of Beastmaster. The Nightmare Creatures were used as beasts of burden, hauling fragments of the dismantled wall behind them. The soldiers were military engineers — while the Song Army did not have as many sappers, it did have some, even if they were not as skilled and ingenious as their counterparts in the enemy camp.  
  
The sappers laid the lumber that had once comprised the proud walls of the impregnable fortress atop the mass of ash worm puppets, swiftly turning it into the deck of a great bridge.  
  
Then, columns of soldiers stepped onto the bloody wood, marching across the bridge like a river.  
  
By the time the Sword Army managed to push the pilgrims back, the garrison of the great fortress had already stepped on the surface of the Breastbone Reach, securing a foothold and spreading to form a wedge-shaped attack formation.  
  
The Seventh Royal Legion was at the tip of the wedge, and Saint Seishan, the Lost Princess of Song, persоnally stood in front of her warriors, clad in enchanted armor of blood-red silk and crimson scales.  
  
Her grey skin seemed to shine in the radiant light of the veiled sky.  
  
Throwing a look at the dark mass of the pilgrims and the enemy army hidden behind it, she raised a hand and made a fist.  
  
Then, without wasting any time, Seishan waved her soldiers forward.  
  
Her voice rolled across the bone plain, followed by the reverberating howl of the war horns.  
  
"Warriors of Song! Attack! For the Queen!"  
  
The Song Army rushed forward.  
  
The pilgrims formed the first wave, the thralls of Beastmaster formed the second. Human warriors were the third.  
  
Standing far above the battlefield, Sunny gritted his teeth.  
  
If he considered the situation coldly, there was nothing to worry about. Even if the Sword Army lost this battle, it would not hurt the plan at all. If anything, it would empower the Queen's position, making her inevitable clash against the King more equal.  
  
Which meant that the two of them would exhaust each other more before one of them reached their limit, and would therefore become easier prey.  
  
However, having spent months as a member of the Sword Army, Sunny could not help but feel distressed when the battle turned against his fellow soldiers.  
  
Clenching his fists, he muttered a curse and turned his back to the battlefield.  
  
His expression became cold.  
  
"It won't be long, now. They will pay for all their crimes soon."  
  
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...Before too long, the Sword Army was buckling.  
  
On the ground, the battle formation of the Sword Domain soldiers was being ravaged by the pilgrims, the thralls, and the warriors of Song. There were vast pockets of emptiness around calamitous clashes between the Transcendent champions — the Sword Saints were at a numerical disadvantage, and were therefore slowly being overwhelmed.  
  
In the sky, the Chain Breaker and the few remaining aerial Echoes were locked in a fierce dogfight against the winged Nightmare Creatures, the Ivory Island hanging above them like a celestial fortress.  
  
The battle had been ferocious and chaotic, claiming many lives in a flash. The Sword Army had never managed to fully recover from the initial tactical disadvantage, and despite its fierce resistance, its formation was on the verge of being broken and split apart.  
  
Once that happened, the battle was going to turn into a slaughter.  
  
It was all just too sudden, and had happened too fast. Before the dazed soldiers could even come to terms with reality, they were already on the precipice of defeat.  
  
Screams and clangor of steel filled the air, and the once-pristine surface of the ancient bone was greedily drinking human blood. The eerie thing about the battle was that despite rivers of blood being spilled, there were hardly any bodies on the ground...  
  
That was because no one stayed lying on the ground for too long in the carnage. Those who were lucky were healed by soothing white flames, while those who were not turned into empty-eyed puppets.  
  
...However, the outcome of the battle was not decided yet.  
  
Because Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan had not entered the melee yet.  
  
When she finally did, however...  
  
Two figures barred her path.  
  
One was a monstrous creature wearing an armor of blood-red silk and crimson scales — she was Seishan, who had assumed her battle form.  
  
The other was an exquisitely beautiful young woman with a delicate build and pale blonde hair. Her eyes were hidden behind a blue blindfold, and there was an empty scabbard attached to her belt.  
  
It was Cassie.  
  
She stood motionless in the middle of the battlefield, not showing any emotion. Her expression was tranquil... almost serene, as if the ghastly nightmare of the harrowing battlefield had no effect on her at all.  
  
Nephis lowered her sword, looking at Cassie with a hint of doubt in her cold, grey eyes.  
  
"...Cas?"  
  
She was only pretending to be surprised, of course, having already guessed what Cassie wanted to do... and what the Song clan was going to do, as well.  
  
But each of them had their role to play.  
  
The monstrous visage of Seishan suddenly loomed over the blind seer. However, even when the ghastly creature's claws rose to rest against her throat, Cassie did not move.  
  
"Nephis..."  
  
Seishan's usually pleasant, husky voice sounded hoarse and distorted, coming out of her terrifying maw.  
  
"You'd better stand down. There will be many battles... but you only have one friend."  
  
Nephis looked at the princess of Song coldly as white flames ignited in her eyes.  
  
"...You seem confident in yourself, Seishan. Are you sure that you can hurt her before I turn you to ash?"  
  
Seishan seemed to hesitate for a moment.  
  
Then, her lips twisted into a grin, revealing several rows of sharp triangular fangs.  
  
"I do believe that I can... but let us not find out."  
  
With that, she lowered her hand, leaving several shallow cuts on Cassie's slender neck.  
  
Then, Seishan said evenly:  
  
"Cassia."  
  
At some point, a dagger appeared in the delicate woman's hand. At the sound of Seishan's voice, Cassie silently raised the dagger and pressed it against her own neck.  
  
Her expression remained eerily calm.  
  
Nephis expression, however, changed slightly.  
  
"What did you..."  
  
Before she could finish the sentence, Cassie pressed the blade deeper, and a thin stream of blood escaped from beneath it.  
  
"Stop!"  
  
Nephis took a step forward, then froze, greeting her teeth.  
  
Her voice sounded even, but there was a note of wariness in it:  
  
"Stop..."  
  
Seishan studied her somberly for a little while.  
  
"I think it is you who should stop. Look around... this battle is already lost, anyway. You will gain nothing if you continue to fight. On the contrary, you will lose something precious."  
  
Answering to her Aspect, the blood flowed faster from the cut on Cassie's neck.  
  
Nephis regarded Seishan silently for a while, her blazing eyes betraying a feeling of dark contempt.  
  
Second passed after second, with more blood spilling on the ancient bone.  
  
Eventually, she gritted her teeth.  
  
...And shouted:  
  
"Retreat!"