2202 One Way or Another  
  
The bloody battle had come to an end.  
  
...It was a strange ordeal.  
  
No one had expected the Queen to attack, but she had. From that point forward, the Song Army had no way back — having abandoned their stronghold and given up on retreating to the heavily fortified main camp, the warriors of Song were as good as committed to one final, decisive battle.  
  
So, what they needed to do before that was weaken the enemy as much as they could. Simply routing the besieging army was not enough, since the surviving soldiers of the Sword Domain would be able to regroup with the forces led by the King and return to the battlefield days later.  
  
No, what Ki Song needed was a slaughter. A thorough culling that would deeply wound the entire Sword Army, cutting its overall strength by almost a half... while simultaneously making the ranks of her dead legion swell. That would have been the soundest strategic solution, at least.  
  
And yet, there was no slaughter. The defeated forces of the Sword Domain were allowed to retreat — having suffered severe casualties, but mostly intact.  
  
The reason why the Queen had spared them was simple...  
  
It was Nephis, Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan.  
  
There was no Saint among the Transcendent champions of the Song Army who could defeat her in battle. Even if they joined forces, the outcome was unclear — especially considering that there were other Sword Saints supporting her.  
  
The only way to dеfeat Changing Star was for the Queen to kill her personally.  
  
Which she very well could do now that the final confrontation was drawing near. However, if Ki Song did enter the battlefield personally to kill Nephis and destroy the greater contingent of the Sword Army, then Anvil of Valor would without a doubt do the same, wiping out Song forces at the Lesser Crossing personally.  
  
Countless Awakened soldiers would die, and plenty of Saints would die, as well. The King would lose his adopted daughter, while the Queen would lose three of hers. At the end, both sides would come out of the conflict bloodied and weakened, having gained no decisive advantage...  
  
Granted, Ki Song stood to gain much more from the ghastly exchange than Anvil. That was because she would not just be killing Changing Star, but also conquering her Citadel, the Ivory Island — a great boon that could vastly improve her position in Godgrave. So, the cold logic of war still dictated that blood had to be spilled.  
  
But perhaps because the Queen cared about her daughters more than thе King did, she stayed her hand.  
  
The gruesome battle had come to an abrupt end without a Sovereign unleashing their power, and the battered forces of the Sword Army were allowed to retreat. The Ivory Island drifted away, overseeing the retreating soldiers — most of them had survived, but too many had not.  
  
The Song Army watched in grim silence.  
  
Somewhere far away, in the Hollows, the news of the sudden attack had already reached the ears of the King of Swords.  
  
After that, the very last act of the profane war of Godgrave began to play out.  
  
The initiative was on the side of the Song Army, so they had the right to choose the final battlefield. Surprisingly enough, Ki Song did not lead her warriors south, but instead marched further east across the Breastbone Reach, deeper into the territory controlled by Anvil.  
  
Eventually, her forces reached the northern edge of the dead god's sternum — a point almost directly opposite the great precipice far south, where the Nameless Temple stood.  
  
Out there, with an abyssal drop to the distant mountain chain of the titanic skeleton's spine behind them, the warriors of Song made camp and started preparing for battle.  
  
They could not have chosen a more eerie battlefield.  
  
Here, the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains were extremely close, and the dark mountains themselves rose from the ground like a jagged black wall in the distance. Cold winds were blowing from the misty slopes, colliding with the heated air of Godgrave and giving birth to furious tornadoes from time to time.  
  
Most disturbingly of all, the colossal skull of the dead god loomed above the northern edge of the Breastbone Reach, its inconceivable scale dwarfing the entire world despite the distance. The neck and the head of the titanic skeleton rested on the slopes of the Hollow Mountains, as if on a pillow, so it almost seemed as if the skull was staring directly at the battlefield from high above.  
  
The unfathomably large, gaping holes of its eyes were full of impenetrable darkness, and its jaw was opened slightly, as if struggling to let out a harrowing groan.  
  
...Or twist into a terrifying grin.  
  
The dead god watched the mortals prepare to fight their last battle in silence, cold mists flowing across the white bone.  
  
Since Ki Song had extended Anvil an invitation, he had no choice but to accept.  
  
Going after the main camp of the Song Army and the Collarbone Citadel was also an option, but that would leave his own army camp vulnerable — so, he pulled the forces that had been supposed to attack the Lesser Crossing from the rear out of the Hollows, gathered the second siege contingent of the Sword Army, and marched north.  
  
The defenders of the Lesser Crossing were left in a perplexing situation.  
  
The force that had been laying siege to their stronghold retreated, leaving them with nothing to do. At the same time, they could neither march across the Breastbone Reach, since the King's army was in the way, nor return to the Collarbone Plain and march east, since there was not enough time — therefore, they could not rejoin the Queen before the final battle.  
  
So, instead, the lesser contingent of the Song Army crossed from the First Rib to the Breastbone Reach and marched south, aiming to conquer the Nameless Temple... it remained to be seen if they would reach it before the two armies clashed, however.  
  
The King seemed to believe that they would not.  
  
At some point, the marching army under his command absorbed the retreating remains of the greater contingent and proceeded to the final battlefield.  
  
Sunny and Nephis were busy with their own preparations for the last battle, of course.  
  
Nephis led the retreating soldiers, while the Lord of Shadows had followed the King from Vanishing Lake north. They were reunited when the two forces met and merged, maintaining a polite distance between each other under the prying eye of the King.  
  
Granted, the situation among those in command of the Sword Army was a bit awkward.  
  
Saint Jest, the King's confidant, had secretly gotten into hot water for killing Song of the Fallen, Changing Star's right hand. Worse still, as it turned out, she was not really dead — instead, she was perfectly alive, and had been somehow captured by the Queen on top of that, which played a large role in the defeat of the siege forces at the Greater Crossing.  
  
For most of the high-ranking members of the Sword Army, it was entirely unclear what exactly had transpired and how Saint Cassia ended up becoming a hostage of the Queen. Some whispered that she had betrayed the Sword Domain, but since her extreme loyalty to Changing Star was well-known, few believed these rumors.  
  
Instead, most of the Sword Saints came to believe that it was the King himself who had conspired against Song of the Fallen. After all, everyone in the Sword Army had witnessed how he was suppressing his adopted daughter — to the point of sending a few of her Fire Keepers to their deaths.  
  
Was it such a stretch to assume that the King would endeavor to remove her most powerful follower fгom the picture, as well? After all, the last time anyone saw Lady Cassia before the Greater Crossing battle, she had been leaving on a dangerous mission in the company of Saint Jest... and everyone who needed to know knew what kinds of tasks Jest performed for the King.  
  
So, the mood among the champions of the Sword Army was somber and heavy.  
  
Anvil did nothing to remove their doubts, treating the situation with his usual cold indifference.  
  
And while all of that was happening...  
  
One of Sunny's incarnations had traveled south, reaching the Nameless Temple at the same time as the retreating forces of the Sword Army met the contingent led by the King.  
  
On the surface, he was acting under orders, aiming to defend the Citadel from a possible conquest party of Song champions. In reality, of course, Sunny had an entirely different goal.  
  
Entering the dark hole of his Citadel, he looked around and let out a sigh.  
  
'It's really happening. My, oh my...'  
  
A dark smile twisted his lips under the mask.  
  
Far north, under the terrifying gaze of the dead god...  
  
The Sword Army reached the northern edge of the Breastbone Reach, spreading slowly to cut any possible path of retreat for the soldiers of Song.  
  
The two armies camped in full view of each other, with only a vast plain of white bone separating them.  
  
Soon enough, the white bone was going to be painted red.  
  
The future of humanity was going to be decided on that bloody field...  
  
One way or another.