2224 Blood Ties  
  
Out there on the battlefield, Cassie felt less and less like a living marionette. Ki Song still held power over her body and soul, of course, but was either too distracted to control Cassie's every move or had simply decided to allow her some measure of freedom.  
  
At the moment, Cassie was unsure whether to feel relieved or regretful about her sudden liberation.  
  
Her body had been controlled by the Queen entirely when the flood of Nightmare Creatures first descended upon the Song Army. It was a strange experience, to feel herself move with martial skill far greater than her own, slaying powerful abominations with the cold composure of a born killer. It was even stranger still because Cassie could only see herself with Seishan's eyes.  
  
Her face was the same, and her body was the same. However, everything else was unfamiliar — her fierce poise, her deadly grace, the smooth fluidity of her confident movements… Cassie could both feel and see her body fight, but she had no part in making it move.  
  
It was eerie.  
  
The role the Queen wanted her to play, it seemed, was to protect Seishan... even at the cost of her own life. So, Cassie's body was like a bodyguard for the beautiful princess of Song, whether she liked it or not.  
  
As the battle between Ki Song and Anvil entered a new stage, however, she could suddenly move on her own again. She also had far greater access to her Aspect again, which made up somewhat for losing the macabre guidance of the Queen.  
  
Cassie was still not entirely free, though. There were certain things that her own body was preventing her from doing — like straying too far from Seishan, for example, or aiming her rapier at Seishan's back.  
  
'I wouldn't want to kill her, anyway…'  
  
Cassie needed Seishan alive as much as the Queen wanted her to survive.  
  
The two of them had stood in front of the Seventh Legion when the battle started.As the abominable jungle broke free from the dim darkness of the Hollows and the dreadful abominations escaped to the surface, Seishan attempted to get the Song Army to react in time — she was one of the first to realize the consequences of the bone plain fracturing, and acted accordingly.  
  
Seishan's swift actions saved numerous lives… but not enough lives.  
  
The battle swiftly descended into utter chaos. The Song Army was just as fractured as the battlefield was, the soldiers separated from each other by the jagged cracks and the scarlet tide rising from them. It was all but impossible to regain any significant measure of control over the formation, but Seishan and Beastmaster still tried, desperately attempting to get the army to pull back.  
  
The precarious battle line was on the verge of collapsing when the Lord of Shadow broke through the endless horde of abominations on his monstrous steed, covered in blood and leading the ravaged Sword Army behind him.  
  
The situation turned a bit better after that — for a short while — but also even more chaotic. All distinctions between units were discarded, and the humans simply fought side by side, not caring who was friend and who was foe.  
  
A terrible carnage usurped the world.  
  
The battle took Seishan and Cassie away from the core of the vast mob of human soldiers, where Nephis and the Fire Keepers held the core against the deadliest of the Nightmare Creatures.  
  
By then, Cassie had regained enough of her powers to use her Awakened and Ascended Abilities freely. Her own performance was far below what she had been able to accomplish under the Queen's control, but adequate enough to stay alive… just barely.  
  
Seishan, on the contrary, was only growing stronger the more blood was spilled around them. It was unclear who was protecting whom, now — and yet, even the daughter of the Queen was not doing too well in the feverish mayhem of the calamitous battle.  
  
Both of them were covered in blood and wounded,their armor tattered and breached. All Cassie could do was stay close to Seishan and follow her as the older woman moved through the battlefield with a strange sense of purpose, her beautiful face turning darker and more desperate with each second.  
  
"Veil!"  
  
Suddenly, Seishan lunged forward, discarding all pretense of caution. She tore into the mass of Nightmare Creatures, her claws tearing their hides like sharp blades. Her fangs ripped into them, as well, sending rivers of fetid blood spilling to the ground.  
  
Each wound Seishan dealt to the abominations bled far more profusely than it should have, and the dreadful beings died far more swiftly, and far more gruesomely, than Cassie had expected.  
  
Breaking through the mass of Nightmare Creatures, they came about a desolate section of the battlefield. Here, no human soldier had survived, and heaps of abominable bodies lay on the ground, piled high. There were some thralls of Beastmaster scattered between the dead abominations, all torn to shreds and dead.  
  
At the center of the vast graveyard of Nightmare Creatures, a sole figure was sprawled on the ground, surrounded by a ring of emptiness.  
  
It was a delicate woman with a slender build, both her enchanting face and her white hair painted red by blood… Moonveil, Seishan's sister.  
  
Dismissing her monstrous form, Seishan dashed toward the motionless figure and fell to her knees near it, leaning close to press her ear against Moonveil's bloodied chest.  
  
Cassie could hear her mumbling quietly:  
  
"Alive… still alive…"  
  
The battle was raging around them, and some hideous horrors could attack them at any moment. Standing above Seishan, Cassie turned and raised her weapons, ready to attack.  
  
...Her pale lips twisted into a faint smile under the dirt and grime of the battlefield.  
  
Maintaining a neutral tone, Cassie spoke without turning back:  
  
"It is hard to envy the burden of your mother's love."  
  
She had waited to speak these words for a long time.  
  
Turning away from unconscious Moonveil for a moment, Sieshan looked up with irе in her cold, piercing eyes.  
  
Then, her gaze slid further, rising to behold the storm of swords raging in the distant sky.  
  
A few words could cut deeper than a sword, if spoken at the right moment.  
  
And a tiny seed of doubt could grow into a towering tree, if planted into fertile soil.  
  
Seishan was too smart to have no doubt, but she needed a push to accept it. In these days that they spent together, Cassie had been subtly preparing to give her that push.  
  
The daughters of Ki Song... were too loyal to their mother. The only thing they were more loyal to were each other.  
  
These orphan girls who had been taken from the streets to be raised as indomitable warriors cherished each other more than they loved the Queen.  
  
That was the lever Cassie had to use if she wanted to send them plummeting into the pit of betrayal. To make them choose, and therefore save their lives when Nephis took her throne.  
  
Seishan's eyes hardened subtly as she watched her mother clash against the King of Swords in the distance as her sister bled in herarms.  
  
Looking away, she started to summon a Memory and gritted her teeth.  
  
"...Shut up."  
  
Cassie smiled and obeyed her command.  
  
After all, she had already said what she wanted to say.  
  
And Seishan had already made a choice, even if she did not realize it yet.  
  
'I hope Moonveil survives.'  
  
But if she didn't, the lesson would only sink deeper.  
  
Cassie sighed.  
  
At that moment, she was distracted by a dark figure that appeared some distance away, and a voice that resounded in her head.  
  
[Cassie… I need to know about the others. Have your powers returned?]  
  
She took a deep breath.  
  
Her powers had returned, indeed.