2302 Beautiful Monster  
  
Kai raised an eyebrow.  
  
'How so?'  
  
Sunny shrugged.  
  
'Well, for one, there are structures carved into the main vent and into the walls of the magma chamber. I guess the entire thing was inhabited once, in the past.'  
  
The structures were too damaged and deformed by the passage of time and the extreme environment, so Sunny did not glimpse a lot about who had built them and why. However, the ruins looked almost like the remains of an ancient city, or at least an inhabited complex. The few edifices that were somewhat intact reminded him of thе Jade Palace and the great stone bridge in front of it.  
  
Interestingly enough, the city seemed to have possessed a shape of defensive fortifications. Those fortifications had not been built to protect it from the enemies coming down the vents of the volcano, though… instead, they were facing the depths of the magma chamber, as if guarding the ruins from something that could come from the molten depths of the earth.  
  
Sunny had cooled off enough to dismiss his helmet. Summoning the Endless Spring, he poured cold water onto his sweaty face and smiled.  
  
'Oh, and there are ancient bones littering every fissure and crevice there. Considering that they had not been turned to ash by the lava, the creatures they had belonged to must have been quite powerful. And there were quite, quite a lot of them.'  
  
Kai frowned.  
  
'Could it be that the Corrupted Tyrant…'  
  
Sunny shook his head.  
  
'No. That thing seemed too weak to have killed them, let alone spawned them. I'd say that all these creatures did not even die in the volcano. I think someone just tossed them down, like getting rid of the trash.'  
  
Kai grew a little wary after hearing those words.  
  
'Who could have done something like that?'  
  
Sunny laughed quietly, then grimaced and coughed when smoke got into his lungs.  
  
'Argh, damn it… who do you think? Must have been the Jade Queen. By the way, can we get out of here?'  
  
Their job done, they headed away from the edge of the abyssal chasm. As they did, Kai asked tentatively:  
  
'Jade Queen?'  
  
Sunny glanced at him and clicked his tongue.  
  
'You know nothing, do you? Did you not research your Citadel at all? Huh! I guess our resident Mr. Perfect is not that perfect, after all.'  
  
Kai just smiled.  
  
'I never claimed to be perfect. And admittedly… academics has always been my weak side.'  
  
The thought of Kai being bad at something that Sunny was good at felt peculiarly satisfying.  
  
'I knew it. That guy just coasted through life on nothing but good looks before meeting me!'  
  
Sunny had been such a positive influence on that fool. Who could have wished for a better friend?  
  
He scoffed.  
  
'Well… to be fair, I don't know that much about the Jade Queen either. She was the original owner of the Jade Palace - in fact, it was built for her.'  
  
He thought back to what little he knew about the history of Ravenheart - most of it glimpsed from the random Memories he had received here and there…  
  
Including the most memorable one, the Sin of Solace, which he had received for finishing off the Remnant of the Jade Queen after it was grievously wounded by Saint Tyris.  
  
That damned sword played quite a large role in his life, changing its entire course.  
  
Sunny shivered.  
  
'You must know that the Tomb of Ariel was built by Ariel, the Demon of Dread. Apparently, he also built the Jade Palace for a breathtaking monster whom he made into a queen. He also bestowed the sinister gift of forbidden knowledge upon her… whatever that means. Ariel was called the Demon of Dread, he was also the Demon of Truth - so, he must have imparted her with some hideous truths.'  
  
He paused for a few seconds, then added in a lighter tone:  
  
'Well, anyway. The Jade Queen seemed to have quite the influence in the ancient past, presiding over the Jade Court. She was known across countless realms for her gorgeousness and wisdom - so much so that many pilgrims sought to gain an audience with her, braving the snow and ash, Not everyone survived the journey… and not everyone survived the Jade Queen's hospitality, either. Apparently, she had a habit of turning those who looked at her funny into Nightmare Creatures. Well, some kind of creatures, at least.'  
  
Kai listened to him intently, absorbed by the tale. Eventually, he asked:  
  
'So… that Jade Queen really lived in Ravenheart once?'  
  
Sunny chuckled.  
  
'Sure. You might even be sleeping in her former bedchamber… but that is pretty much all the information about the Jade Queen I have. I don't even know what she looked like. She might have been a bug, for all I know.'  
  
The Remnant of the Jade Queen had been, at least. A huge, peculiarly gorgeous beetle. But that did not really prove anything.  
  
Kai slowly shook his head.  
  
'The throne of the Jade Palace is built for a human, though.'  
  
Sunny shrugged.  
  
'Maybe she was a odd monster who had a Transformation Ability that allowed her to become human. Who knows what Ariel did to her? That guy built the Great River, so we know how bizarre his creations were.'  
  
He hesitated for a while, and then added:  
  
'He must have cared about the Jade Queen greatly, though. Enough so for Nether to mark the Jade Palace on the wall of the Ebony Tower.'  
  
Kai remained silent for a while, then asked with a hint of wistfulness in his voice:  
  
'So what do you think happened to the Jade Queen? Where did she go?'  
  
Sunny gave him a long look.  
  
'What a peculiar question.'  
  
'How should I know?Perhaps the truth she carried destroyed her. Possibly someone grew covetous of her grace and her beauty, and ruined her. Perhaps she followed Ariel into the Doom War and perished on one of its battlefields.'  
  
He paused for a moment, then sighed.  
  
'I encountered a Corrupted Tyrant called the Remnant of the Jade Queen once. If that was what remained of her… then her end must not have been happy or gorgeous.'  
  
Rather, it would have been grotesque.  
  
By then, they had climbed high enough for Kai to take flight comfortably, Sunny once again hid in his shadow.  
  
As Kai streaked across the sky above Ravenheart, a few people stopped and gazed up, pointing at his small silhouette with smiles on their faces. Naturally, he was not in his dragon form at the moment, so there was no crowd of awed spectators.  
  
Soon enough, Kai landed on the surface of the great stone bridge and walked toward the Jade Palace. The magnificent obsidian edifice towered above him, casting a deep shadow… Sunny felt a hint of awe at that moment, as well.  
  
He had spent several years trying to sneak into the Jade Palace unnoticed, to no avail. The Raven Queen has been too powerful and mysterious, and her daughters were too observant.  
  
But now, Ki Song was gone, her daughters were scattered across the Dream Realm, and Sunny was a Sovereign himself. The gates of the Jade Palace stood open for him, and he could enter freely.  
  
He was full of anticipation.  
  
'I wonder what I'll discover inside.''