2303 Jade Palace  
  
The Jade Palace was vast. It was not quite the size of Bastion, which was a stone city in and of itself, but still complicated enough to be like an enormous labyrinth. Interestingly enough, while its exterior had at some point turned entirely black, its inner walls were still pristine and white, as if cut from flawless jade.  
  
There were innumerable halls, corridors, chambers, stairwells, and passages, all interconnected into a sprawling maze. Even more confusing was the fact that some sections of the palace seemed to have been built with humans in mind, while some were far more daunting in scale, clearly meant for creatures of towering size. Despite the fact that the radiant palace had stood empty for thousands of years, it was still emanating a subtle feeling of elegant opulence and majesty.  
  
There were stone gardens within the black walls of Ravenheart, many statues and intricate reliefs, great pools of icy water, and even bubbling hot springs. More than that, the Jade Palace stretched far underground - and lower still, its foundation opened into a vast system of ice caves that hid inside the lonesome mountain. Those caves had been where the Queen of Worms had kept her great army of dead puppets.  
  
Less than a hundred Awakened had made the Jade Palace their home during her mother's rule. Later, it became known as Ravenheart, serving as the Citadel of the Great Clan Song - tens of thousands of Awakened warriors were anchored to its Gateway then, with numerous Masters and Saints living under its roof.  
  
By now, there were hundreds of thousands of Awakened anchored at the Jade Palace, and although the retainers of Clan Song had scattered to serve Seishan and her sisters in various Citadels across the western reaches of the Dream Realm, Kai's subordinates took their place. Most of them were Nightsingers, who had been following Kai since the Southern Campaign. The rest of his staff was composed of local Awakened, government agents, emissaries of the Immortal Flame clan - some of whom had been retainers of the Valor before - and assistants sent over by the daughters of Ki Song.  
  
There were a few members of the Shadow Clan hidden among them, as well.  
  
The palace had been roughly divided into three areas. The smallest one surrounded the Gateway and was open to the public. A largeг area was meant for Kai and his people - it was carefully maintained and tended to, giving the feeling of a radiant and inhabited space. Finally, the largest area by far was uninhabited. Awakened soldiers patrolled it regularly, but other than that, there was usually not a soul in sight. Most of the magnificent palace stood empty, shrouded in silence.  
  
Sunny did not know what he was looking for, but he figured out that his shadow sense would discover any anomaly rapidly. Sadly, there were a few obstacles standing in his way.  
  
'Damnation. I knew it…'  
  
On the first evening, after Kai was done with his duties as the Steward of the West, the two of them had a meal together. However, Sunny was in a dour mood. Kai gave him a curious look.  
  
'Is the food not to your taste, Sunny?'  
  
Sunny shook his head.  
  
'No, the food is good. It's just that this place is giving me trouble.' He remained quiet for a few seconds, then sighed and leaned back. 'First of all, my spatial Ability barely works within these walls. Secondly, my senses are being blocked by something - it is like I have to fight against all this jade to perceive what is hidden behind it.'  
  
Kai smiled.  
  
'Ah. I experienced it as well. I can't see through the walls of the Jade Palace at all.'  
  
Sunny picked up a piece of tender meat and bit it fiercely, then waved what remained in the air.  
  
'I am not surprised, though. You know… one time, I got pretty hungry, so I snuck inside a Great Monster to carve out some meat. I did procure the meat, but getting out proved to be a problem - some of my powers were being suppressed, just like here. Because I was inside of a living being, well, a corpse of a living being.'  
  
Kai sighed and raised his wine glass with a trembling hand.  
  
'So it was the corpse of a Great Monster. Thank the gods.'  
  
Sunny ignored his remark and swallowed the rest of the meat.  
  
'We know that Ariel liked to use unconventional building methods and materials. Who knows how he created the Jade Palace? Its walls have no seams at all. Almost as if this entire structure had been cast instead of being constructed… or grown. In any case, explоring it will take more time than I hoped.'  
  
Kai smiled.  
  
'Well, there is a lot to explore. A lot of spectacular things to see, as well as things that inspire awe. I haven't had time to see most of the Jade Palace myself yet, but sometimes I stop to look around and think… great beings once walked these halls. Gods and demons once rested in this garden, just like I am resting here now. Isn't it amazing?'  
  
Sunny scratched the back of his head.  
  
'Well, yeah. But I am sort of used to stuff like that. One of my incarnations lives in the Tower of Hope, after all. I brushed sides with a god once - oh, I also swallowed a piece of a daemon. As for breathtaking things, you should really come explore the Shadow Realm with me sometime. The view is to die for… literally…' He laughed.  
  
Kai did, too. Granted, his laugh sounded a little stifled.  
  
'Yeah… possibly I should…' Hе paused for a few seconds, then asked cautiously: 'So, how long do you think it will take you to find what you are looking for?'  
  
Sunny shrugged.  
  
'I'll start exploring earnestly starting tomorrow. After that, it is all up to luck. Why?'  
  
Kai shook his head.  
  
'Nothing, really. It's just that I'm expecting guests in a few days. The Song sisters are going to be in Ravenheart for business - a couple of them, at least. They don't know that the Lord of Shadows is alive, but I don't think that avoiding their gaze will trouble you.'  
  
Sunny coughed.  
  
'Sure. But, just in case… is Seishan coming?'  
  
Kai raised an eyebrow.  
  
'I think so. Why are you asking?'  
  
Sunny grimaced.  
  
'That one… has sharp senses. I'll be careful.' He remained quiet for a bit, then shrugged. 'Come to think of it, perhaps I won't. After all, those Song sisters had lived in the Jade Palace the longest. So if we want to find what we're looking for rapidly, wouldn't we want to get their assistance?'  
  
Kai sighed.  
  
'That is true. However, I am not sure they will be willing to help you.'  
  
Sunny grinned.  
  
'Don't worry about it. I can be very persuasive when I need to.' He pointed to himself proudly. 'Do you want to know how persuasive I am, Nightingale? Not to brag, but оne time, I convinced a dead man to help me by promising to kill him…'