2317 Worm of Doubt  
  
Sunny let out a long sigh, then fell into contemplation. He studied the grid for a while, his eyes hidden in deep shadow… eventually, though, he glanced at Kai.  
  
'We lack information about the rules of this world, and trying to learn more about it through trial and error seems too dangerous. This places us in an unfortunately passive position. We have no choice - no better choice, at least - than to wait for the adversary to mаke their move. We will be able to understand more about Ariel's Game by watching the Snow Abominations act.'  
  
He grimaced.  
  
'You mentioned that the insects in the ice hive seemed to be slowly awakening, while the other two Beasts have not moved yet. It is not surprising, really, considering that they must have spent thousands of years imprisoned in this game. But… now that we are here, they'll probably come to their senses soon.'  
  
Sunny considered Kai for a few seconds, thеn asked:  
  
'In the meantime… you led soldiers in your Second Nightmare and in Antarctica, didn't you? You also spent enough time with Morgan to learn a thing or two from her. What do you think our strategy should be?'  
  
Kai raised an eyebrow and hesitated for a few seconds.  
  
'I… am a bit surprised to hear about my Second Nightmare from you, Sunny. But if you know what happened to us in the Kingdom of Hope, you know that the only thing I led my soldiers to was their deaths. As for Antarctica, my role there was merely that of a tactical commander. Our broader strategy was usually decided by the Army HQ.'  
  
Sunny smiled.  
  
'Nightingale… Kai, my friend. I know that you are plagued by insecurity, but please, for the love of gods, don't let it fester into an inferiority complex on my account. Excessive modesty is not a flattering look for a distinguished gentleman - even one as dashing as you. So cut it out and take accountability for your accomplishments, for once.'  
  
Kai glanced at him, a peculiar emotion hidden in his gorgeous green eyes.  
  
Sunny sighed.  
  
The charming Saint was often too nice for his own good, but that was not his only character flaw. He was also unsure of himself, deep down. Sunny knew that Kai had always felt somewhat insecure about his place in the cohort… and as a result, in the broader world.  
  
He could understand these doubts, to a degree. After all, the members of Changing Star's cohort were exceptional individuals, each and every one of them - ever since the Forgotten Shore. There was Nephis herself, Cassie and her prophetic gift, Sunny and his Fated encounters, and Effie, who had survived years hunting alone on the streets of the Dark City.  
  
Later, there was also Soul Reaper Jet - a Master whom even Saints feared.  
  
In comparison, Kai was a far more mundane individual. He had survived the perils of the Dark City behind the walls of the Bright Castle, earning soul shards to pay Gunlaug's tribute by selling his rare Aspect Ability. In a sense, he was more similar to someone like Aiko than to the exalted warriors around him.  
  
And yet, Kai had risen to the occasion every time his help had been needed - for no other reason than his innate integrity and principles. He was not driven by an overwhelming obsession or forced into action by inescapable fate… instead, he simply did his best to do what he felt was the right thing to do.  
  
From the harrowing reaches of the Forgotten Shore to the dark expanse of the Tomb of Ariel, he elevated himself step by step until there was hardly a handful of people in the world who could say that they had accomplished more, and endured more, than Saint Nightingale - the heroic Dragonslayer.  
  
It was just that Kai's opinion of himself never seemed to catch up to his accomplishments.  
  
Sunny may not have liked that his friend was always selling himself short, but there was little he could do about it. After all, there was some truth to what Kai thought about himself - it would have been hard for anyone, not just him, to contend against inexplicable monsters like Sunny, Nephis, or other powerhouses in their orbit.  
  
But now… now, Kai's insecurity was not merely undeserved, it was an actual problem. Sovereigns were arrogant by nature, after all - they had to be. Only someone supremely confident in their cause could be bold enough to force their will upon the world.  
  
How could someone who doubted himself convince the world to submit?  
  
So, Sunny hoped to disabuse Kai of the preposterous notion that he was somehow less deserving than the rest of them.  
  
'Ah, I'm really not the right person for this job,'  
  
Actually, he was arguably the worst choice - after all, Sunny had never been great at dealing with people. He was so atrocious at it, in fact, that he had even ended up living alone in seclusion and slowly losing his mind multiple times in his life.  
  
But at the same time, he was also the best choice.  
  
Because Kai was keenly aware of lies and insincerity, while Sunny never lied.  
  
Kai glanced at him with a peculiar expression for a while.  
  
Eventually, he asked in a cautious tone:  
  
'Sunny… you think that I'm dashing?'  
  
Sunny blinked a few times.  
  
'T - that… that is your main takeaway?!'  
  
He exhaled slowly through gritted teeth.  
  
'Bastard, are you fishing for compliments now? Sure, yes, I do think that. Your style is impeccable, and your face is a weapon of mass destruction. Happy now?!'  
  
Kai smiled radiantly.  
  
'Why, thank you! It really means a lot, coming from the owner of the Eye Candy Ca…'  
  
'Shut up!'  
  
Sunny huffed and pointed to the map of Ariel's Game.  
  
'Strategy! Remember?'  
  
Kai kept smiling for a few seconds, then turned to the grid drawn in the ash. A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.  
  
'We really don't know much about how this game works, but generally… the mountain we are occupying is the Castle, which suggests some kind of defensive advantage. Common logic dictates that we should make use of these fortifications to repel the adversary, but actually, such a strategy will simply become our death. Since the adversary forces are so overwhelming, locking ourselves into a defensive strategy will merely postpone our defeat.'  
  
Sunny nodded.  
  
Kai was, without a doubt, right on that account.