2320 Ash Castle  
  
The Ash Castle was a strange and towering structure. It was built above the main vent of the volcano, seemingly hovering in the air. At first glance, it seemed as if its immense weight was supported by nothing except the rising torrents of smoke… but at a closer glance, Sunny saw enormous chains biting into the dark rock of the crater, covered in thick layers of soot.  
The castle was hanging above the abyss, the smoke - filled emptiness serving as its moat.  
The defensive value of such a structure was questionable, to say the least. Sure, any attacker would plummet into the fiery depths of the volcano unless they found a way to breach the wide chasm, but at the same time, the defenders would find it difficult to prevent the enemy from destroying the anchors of the chains that held the castle in the air.  
  
Extending his shadow sense into the abyssal vent, Sunny sensed more chains fastening the castle to its walls further down. There seemed to be some kind of mechanism built into the obsidian plate that served as the foundation for the charred fortress, now broken and in a state of disrepair.  
'Was this castle able to descend into the depths of the volcano once?  
  
Even if it had been, it was stuck in place now, barely able to support its own weight.  
Sunny imagined the whole structure plummeting into the smoke under their feet. That would be troublesome… but not too troublesome. After all, he could fly away аt any moment.  
  
The drawbridge of the castle was raised, so Sunny manifested two raven - black wings and offered Slayer a hand. She glanced at it chillingly, while Kai smiled.  
  
'I see you are a gentleman…'  
  
As Slayer took his hand, Sunny strained his muscles and tossed her into the air. The nimble Shadow shot over the chasm like a bullet, disappearing into the smoke - a few seconds later, she landed on one of the crumbling towers of the castle, twirled to regain her balance, and summoned her bow in one graceful motion.  
Her skirt flared, and by the time its hem fell to rest on her smooth ebony thigh once again, an arrow was already nocked on the string of the black bow.  
Kai watched all of that happen in silence. Sunny was blinded by the smoke, but could sense the shadows - the charming archer, however, could see everything transpire just fine.  
  
He sighed.  
'Never mind.'  
  
Sunny smiled.  
'What, did you expect me to give her a ride? Thanks, but no thanks. The last time she mounted me was too memorable.'  
He paused for a moment, and then added in a glum tone:  
  
'I mean, she cut off my wings, strangled me, and almost drove a knife into my skull.'  
  
Kai blinked a couple of times.  
  
'She did?'  
  
When Sunny nodded, he gave him a reproachful look.  
'You know… something like that would have been good to know before I carried her across the sea of clouds on my back.'  
  
Sunny grinned.  
  
'I did cross my mind to give you a warning. But I was sure that she would not try to kill you… well, mostly sure. Reasonably sure? I was somewhat sure that she would not try to kill you.'  
  
With that, he jumped into the chasm, spread his wings, and allowed the currents of heated air to carry him across the abyssal moat of the Ash Castle. Kai followed a few seconds later with a quiet sigh.  
If there had been something perilous waiting for them inside, Slayer would have already turned it into a pincushion with her arrows. So, the two of them landed calmly on the cracked floor of the castle's vast courtyard, then walked toward the crumbling keep.  
Slayer allowed her bow to turn into a slender chain vambrace, then climbed down the tower with lethal grace. She seemed to plummet from one support to another, wedging her short swords between the weathered stones when there was none to find purchase on - in just a few short moments, she reached the ground and joined them.  
  
When they entered the keep, Sunny glanced around with a surprised expression.  
'Huh.'  
What looked like a castle from the outside was actually merely a crude model of one. There was nothing inside, really - no floors, no chambers, no complicated maze of corridors and stairwells. Instead, there was simply a vast empty space, the floor covered in ash that piled like mountains in the corners.  
  
It seemed that even Ariel's attention to detail had a limit.  
'Well, it makes sense.'  
After all, the Ash Tyrants that had populated this castle once would not have been humans. Their size would have varied greatly, too - the towering gate of the keep hinted that some of them were truly enormous.  
'Do you see anything under the ash?'  
  
Sunny did not know what he wanted to find, exactly, but he had hoped to discover some clues about Ariel, his game, and the Jade Queen.  
Kai shook his head slowly.  
'It's all in ruins. But there is some kind of pedestal in the center.'  
  
They looked at each other, then made their way to the heart of the empty keep.  
There, the floor of the castle opened into a great circular pit. Smoke rose through the opening like a rugged pillar, escaping through a similar one in the roof of the Ash Castle.  
And just in front of the pit, there was a charred stone pedestal that resembled an altar, its surface covered in ash.  
  
Walking closer, Sunny hesitated for a few seconds, then brushed the ash away. His hand felt two small shapes hidden beneath it - clearing more of the ash, Sunny picked one of them up and studied it impassively.  
There, in his palm, lay a bestial figurine cut from flawless white jade.  
  
It was the figure of a Snow Beast.  
'Two of them…'  
  
Twelve of the fourteen Snow figures remained on the board, which meant that the player of the Ash Domain had managed to slay two - two Beasts.  
  
And here, two Snow Beast figurines were resting on an altar.  
That… could not have been a coincidence.  
'Why do you think these figures are here?'  
  
Kai's question made Sunny frown.  
  
He remained silent for a few seconds, then shrugged.  
'I'm not entirely sure.'  
  
Then, he suddenly remembered something… the ancient bones resting in the depths of the Ravenheart volcano.  
Following an impulse, Sunny shifted his weight a little and tossed the figure of the Snow Beast into the pit.  
  
It disappeared into the smoke without a trace.  
  
A dozen seconds passed in silence, and then…  
  
Sunny was suddenly somewhere else.