2354 Plentiful Choices  
The interior of the Shrine of Truth was much like the interior of the Ash Castle - a mere facsimile of an actual structure, as opposed to a real one. It was one vast chamber, more modest in size than the smoke-filled hall of the crumbling fortress, but still large enough for an enormous Abomination to occupy.  
Of course, there were no Nightmare Creatures inside at the second - just Sunny, Kai, and Slayer.  
  
The Shrine was not exactly comfortable, but at least there was no ash falling on them from above. The smoke was contained in the middle of the great chamber, so the rest of it was clean, and even pleasantly cool. Kai studied their temporary shelter for a few seconds, then sighed.  
  
'Honestly, it is a bit of a downgrade compared to the houses you've been building. You are getting quite good at making those.' Sunny chuckled. 'Am I? That's good to hear.' He shook his head.  
'I spent most of my life being homeless, you know. So, in the end, I got myself a home that can follow me around… and eat my enemies…' He let out a wistful sigh. 'Who knew I wouldn't be able to bring it with me, this time?'  
  
Sunny shook his head again and headed toward the pillar of smoke.  
Apart from its form and size, the interior of the Shrine of Truth was different from the Ash Castle in two ways. First of all, since this volcano had just emerged, there was only a thin layer of ash on the floor. Secondly…  
Sunny reached the circular pit leading to the depths of the volcano and stopped, looking at its edge with a thoughtful expression. 'I feel like I was right.'  
  
Instead of a single pedestal, there were two altars in front of the pit. If Sunny's suspicion was correct, they were meant for the jade figurines. One altar would allow him to exchange a Snow figure for a truth, while the other… the other would most likely allow him to sacrifice it in exchange for some kind of boon, either for himself or for his warriors. He was not going to decide how to spend his trophies just yet, though. First, he needed to learn the identity of the third Snow Abomination they would be fighting in two dawns.  
'Let's rest for a bit.'  
  
Kai had commented how the Shrine of Truth was not that comfortable, but nothing prevented Sunny from making it more habitable. He manifested a few pieces of furniture and sprawled on a sofa, feeling a little satisfied by the fact that it felt far less weird than the previous ones. He had not slept inside Ariel's Game yet, and while there was no real need to, Sunny still felt himself drifting into a slumber. There would probably be no opportunity for him to rest later, so he could just as well use this last one.  
Sleep did not come easily, though, and Sunny soon found himself laying there, wide awake, plagued by uninvited thoughts. Eventually, he sighed and sat up.  
  
Kai was awake, too, looking at the billowing smoke with a distant еxpression. Sunny rubbed his eyes, then stared at the charming archer silently. 'Is something bothering you, Sunny?' He smiled crookedly. 'I guess.'  
  
Sunny remained quiet for a few seconds, then said: 'You are a curious person. You know that, right, Kai?'  
The charming archer raised an eyebrow and turned to look at him. 'Me? If anything, I thought that I was quite a boring person. Compared to my comrades, I mean.' Sunny scoffed.  
'Oh, but that is exactly what makes you curious. The fact that you are different from the rest of us.' Kai remained silent, as if inviting him to continue. Sunny leaned on the backrest of the sofa and sighed.  
'This armour I wear was forged by Nether, the Demon of Destiny. He is also known as the Demon of Choice. And here we are, searching for a piece of the Demon of Fate. Fate, destiny, choice… you might not know it, but all these things are of great interest to me.' He crossed his arms.  
'It used to be that very few people, apart from the Legacy scions, got to choose whether they wanted to be infected by the Nightmare Spell or not. They were forced to face the First Nightmare, and then, they were forced to enter the Dream Realm come the winter solstice. Some survived, and some didn't. However, once the carriers of the Spell Awakened… then, they finally got to choose something for themselves. Whether they wanted to challenge the Second Nightmare, or not.'  
Sunny smiled darkly.  
'At least in theory. In truth, none of us had a real choice in that matter. For Nephis, it was the only way to survive and return to the waking world. For Effie, it was the only way to gain a healthy body. For Cassie, it was a necessary step toward fixing what she had broken. Mordret was a mirror wraith with no vessel to call his own. Jet had to keep growing stronger to survive her Flaw. As for me… well, I could not allow myself to fall behind someone.'  
He pointed to Kai.  
'So, really… out of all of us, only you had that choice, Kai. You could have stayed Awakened and spent the rest of your life in safety, living comfortably. And yet, you still chose to answer the Call of Nightmare. So, I am curious… why?'  
  
Kai seemed a little uncomfortable. He lingered for a few seconds, then shrugged.  
'I guess… I did indeed have the luxury of making more choices than most of my friends. At first, I did exactly what you said - stayed safe and lived comfortably, closing my eyes tо the sorrows of the rest. That was in the Bright Castle. But after escaping the Forgotten Shore, I did not want to live like that anymore.' He smiled.  
'Someone once told me - I don't quite recall who - that strength was the only virtue, while weakness was the only sin. It seemed convincing at first, but then, I changed my mind. Actually, having strength but misusing it felt like a far greater sin than being weak. I had already sinned by being weak, so after Awakening, I did not want to sin again by wasting my strength. So, I chose responsibility. I also chose to follow my friends, who did not have the same fгeedom of choice I had.'  
  
Sunny leaned forward a little.  
'That is exactly it. You had freedom, but surrendered it in favor of responsibility.' His eyes grew darker. 'Don't you ever regret it? Don't you miss the freedom you gave up?'  
Kai simply laughed.  
His eventual answer made Sunny flinch a little.  
'No. I haven't missed it once.'