2355 Empty Vessel  
  
Sunny studied Kai intently, hiding his surprise. He had expected his friend to give a negative answer, of course - after all, he knew Kаi too well to think otherwise. And yet the categorical nature of his denial left Sunny rattled.  
  
He leaned back a little, frowning. 'Not… even once?'  
  
Kai shrugged. 'Of course. This freedom you talk about… well, it is an elusive concept, I guess? It changes depending on how you define it. Are we talking about freedom from responsibility, from duty, from having to act on behalf of the others?'  
  
The charming archer smiled softly. 'If so, then I see no reason to regret surrendering it. You seem to regard freedom as something inherently positive, but is it, reаlly? To me, it seems that freedom is neither good nor bad - rather, it is like a transparent, empty vessel. You can fill it with good things or bad things, making it either benign or malignant… but the very act of placing something in the vessel breaks it, and you're not free anymore. So, I guess it's a bit of a paradox.'  
  
He sighed. 'The only way to remain free, in this context, is to leave the vessel empty. And while emptiness is neither benign nor malignant, it is certainly… much sadder than either.'  
  
Kai shook his head. 'The things I filled my vessel with suit me fine. So what if it's not empty and transparent anymore? Why would I want to live a life of emptiness, anyway?'  
  
Sunny slowly shook his head. 'I guess there's no reason, but still… doesn't everуone want to be free?'  
  
Kai considered his question seriously. 'True, people generally long to be free - free to live their lives the way they want, that is, not to be free for the sake of freedom. So what they really want is freedom to make their own choices, not freedom from the consequences of those choices. Even if they become bound to something as a result, unable to do as they want anymore as a result.'  
  
Sunny smiled bitterly. 'Ah… that old nugget of wisdom.' He remained silent for a while, looking into the distance somberly. 'Someone told me once that no one is really free in this world. Everyone is chained to someone, or something… so, the only real freedom there is is the freedom to choose your own chains.' He grinned darkly. 'Of course, I proved this wisdom wrong. Using your metaphor, I put the broken vessel back together and cleaned it until its walls were transparent once again.'  
  
Kai raised an eyebrow. 'Peculiar. You are telling the truth, and yet, what you say can't possibly be true.'  
  
Sunny was surprised. 'Can't possibly be true? How so?'  
  
Noticing his bewilderment, Kai chuckled. 'I mean… I might have some responsibilities, but they are really nothing compared to what you, Sunny, have chosen to bear. You volunteered to fight in the Domain War despite not having a stake in that fight, carried the weight of innumerable lives on your shoulders, faced a Sovereign in battle, and took his crown. Now, you are one of the two guardian angels of humanity… well, possibly a guardian devil is a more fitting term.'  
  
Sunny's face twitched. 'Please don't mention angels when I'm around.'  
  
Kai gave him a strange look, then shrugged and continued. 'What I mean to say is that you used to enjoy infinitely more freedom than I had ever possessed, and you discarded it all in favor of infinitely more responsibility than I will ever bear. So, how can you claim that your vessel is empty?'  
  
He coughed and glanced away. 'Oh, and also, can we steer away from this whole empty vessel metaphor? Honestly, it's not one of my best… lyrics were never my strong suit, but still, I used to be a musician. So it's a bit embarrassing.'  
  
Sunny blinked a couple of times. 'Sure, we can.'  
  
He remained silent for a moment, then shrugged. 'Well, if you put it that way, there does indeed seem to be a contradiction. Actually, it was exactly as you said. I had strived to break free for a very long time, but when I finally did, it came at a cost. And what followed after… was empty and sad, You don't seem to regret surrendering your freedom, but I was full of regret after gaining mine. I was alone and had nothing, so I made a choice to come back and change everything. That, of course, bound me to a lot of things… and now, I feel compelled to see them through.'  
  
Kai smiled. 'Then all is well, no? Since you chose that path yourself.'  
  
Sunny sighed, then rubbed his face tiredly. 'It's not that easy. The path is long and winding… what if following it will rob me of the ability to make choices for myself in the future?'  
  
Kai scratched the back of his head. 'Uh… to be honest, I lost track of all these metaphors a bit, so I am not sure I understand. But if the choice not to have as many choices is your own, then all is good, as well. I think?'  
  
Sunny looked at him and smiled. Then, he laughed. 'So it's okay to be chained as long as I decide to wear shackles myself? All this talk, and we ended up where we began.'  
  
Kai gave him a guilty look. 'Sorry if I wasn't helpful. But, in my defense… I have no idea what you are talking about.'  
  
Sunny gave him a nod and laid back down on his sofa. 'It's alright. I appreciate you humoring me.'  
  
Kai hesitated for a few seconds, then said in a tentative tone: 'Perhaps I could be more helpful if you told me what choice you are contemplating.'  
  
Sunny yawned. 'Oh, it's just… I'm wondering whether I should go bird hunting sometime in the future. That's all.'  
  
Kai opened his mouth, then closed it again. Then, he exhaled slowly. 'I see. Well, good luck with whatever you decide to do.'  
  
After a few moments of silence, he asked: 'Are you going to sleep? If so, I can stand guard. Not that nights here are dangerous.'  
  
Sunny sighed, then shook his head. 'No… I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight. So, I'll do something else instead.'  
  
Kai leaned back. 'What?'  
  
Sunny smiled. 'Being here inside another one of Ariel's harrowing masterpieces has gotten me inspired. So, I am going to do some sorcery.' His smile grew darker. 'I am going to perform sorcery so grand and terrible that even daemons would have been impressed.'