2358 First Ring  
  
With a sigh, Kai walked over to the altar and placed the Snow Beast figure - the one they had retrieved after slaying Abundance - on its surface. Sunny watched him intently, wondering if the figure would still have to be tossed into the volcano. And how would it have worked if the Shrine of Truth belonged to the Snow Domain, instead? There would be no pit filled with smoke here if it had been, after all. However, he did not have to worry. Almost as soon as Kai placed the figure on the altar, it began to glow. Then, luminous fissures appeared on the surface of the flawless white jade, and a second later, it suddenly exploded into a swirling mass of ash.  
  
"Huh…"  
  
Before either of them could react, the ash swirled around Kai… and then suddenly flowed right into him, disappearing into his chest. Neither Sunny nor Kai moved for a few moments. Eventually, Kai coughed and waved his hand in front of him. "Great. More ash…"  
His expression was a little miserable. They had enough water to drink, but not enough of it to properly clean themselves. Considering the nature of the Ash Domain, with its pillars of smoke and ash constantly falling from the sky, that meant that Kai was constantly covered in smears of soot. The charming archer had managed to maintain a neat appearance even on the Forgotten Shore, so Sunny knew how much his friend was suffering. "Kai… hey, Kai…"  
The charming archer turned and glanced at him bitterly. "What?"  
Sunny sighed. "Did you not notice? That cloud of ash did not just swirl around you. It went into you, you fool!"  
Kai blinked a couple of times. "It did?"  
Sunny nodded. In fact, the whole process looked quite familiar. It was similar to how essence entered Awakened when they broke soul shards, to the point that Sunny was inclined to assume that Ariel had modeled the process to look the same.  
  
He hesitated for a moment. "How… how do you feel?"  
Kai looked into the distance, as if concentrating on the state of his body. Slowly, a startled expression appeared on his face. "I feel… stronger. Much stronger."  
Sunny studied him for a bit, then shifted his gaze and studied Kai's soul. Eventually, he said in a curious tone: "Well, buddy, I don't know how to tell you this… but there's a ring of ash surrounding your soul core now."  
He was, naturally, telling the truth. There, under his gaze, Kai's Transcendent soul core was shining brightly with breathtaking light. But now, there was a ring of ash suspended around it, many black flakes shining with reflected radiance. It looked very much like a planet surrounded by a thin ring system.  
Peculiarly enough, the soul essence that flowed in and out of Kai's core passed through the ring of ash first, assuming a new and peculiar quality.  
  
Kai flinched. "There's ash… inside me?"  
He looked like someone desperately wishing to take a shower. Sunny cleared his throat, then pattеd him on the shoulder. "Relax. It's… mystical ash, not real ash. Point is, it's making you stronger, so all is good, right?"  
Kai let out a long sigh. Sunny studied him for a moment, then asked: "But, more importantly… how much stronger is it making you, exactly?"  
The charming archer remained silent for a while, then said evenly: "I am not entirely sure, but… I feel like I can crush a mountain."  
Sunny grinned. "How about you try crushing me, first?"  
He summoned a pedestal made of shadows and put his elbow on it, inviting Kai to an armwrestling match. After a brief struggle, the back of the charming archer's hand slammed into the pedestal, and he took a step back, massaging it with a pained expression. "Ouch."  
Sunny contemplated for a bit, then smiled. "You're not exactly as strong as a Supreme Beast, but you are way stronger than a Transcendent should be now. Your essence has become more potent, and even your will seems to be receiving a boost. I can understand the former, but how the hell does the latter wоrk?"  
Not only had Кai's will become more intense, but it also felt… familiar, somehow. Cold, and murderous. Quite unpleasant, really. Like the Will of a despicable, unhinged psychopath…  
'Wait.'  
That was the flavor of Sunny's own will!  
He blinked a couple of times, then stared at Kai again.  
'No, it actually makes sense?'  
Kai was being enhanced by the Ash Domain, and who was the ruler of that Domain at the moment? It was Sunny! So the source of the force empowering Kai was not Ariel's Game itself, but the Ash Tyrant. The Ash Beast was being strengthened by the power of its ruler, with the laws of the miniature realm, and the ash itself, serving as intermediaries.  
'But if I am the master of the Ash Domain…'  
Sunny extended his power outward, trying to form ash like he had always shaped shadows. To his surprise, it worked - a bit of ash гose into the air, solidifying into a crude effigy of a human. Allowing the effigy to crumble, Sunny peered into Kai's soul once more. 'If I can manipulate this ash, then won't I be able to influence that ash, as well?'  
And indeed, he felt a subtle connection. Using this connection, Sunny poured more of his will into the ring surrounding Kai's soul core. It accepted a bit, but rejected the rest, as if reaching its capacity.  
  
Sunny looked up, studying Kai's face. "And how much stronger do you feel now?"  
Kai moved his shoulders slightly. "Hmm. I can't say that I feel any stronger. But… I am not quite sure how to explain it, but I do feel much deadlier."  
Sunny remained silent for a while, staring at him with a neutral expression. Then, he grinned widely. "That you are!"  
With that, he looked the other way. "Slayer… Slayer! You turn now. Come on, put the figure on the altar!"  
As the same minor miracle happened to his Shadow, Sunny laughed. "Great. Amazing! That is almost like a miniature, way more modest version of what happened to me once."  
Kai gave him a hesitant look. "And… what happened to you, exactly?"  
Sunny shrugged dismissively. "Оh, nothing too insane. I just received a blessing by making a sacrifice on an altar once, too. Naturally, I did not have such handy jade figurines with me back then, so I had to sacrifice myself… good thing Shadow God was in the mood to rise from the dead for a second and bless me."  
Kai sighed. "Right. Nothing too insane. Indeed!"