2378 Eerie Clues  
  
The only witness - Slayer - was not talking, but Sunny had some other clues, as well. His own state, for example.  
  
Quite a lot of his essence was gone. Not only that, but he could not summon any of his shades, which meant that they all had been destroyed in the battle and were currently repairing themselves.  
  
The Shadow Wolf and its pack, the Obsidian Wasps, and Abundance. 'Had I actually implemented the shade augmentation strategy?' It was possible.  
  
But had he implemented it against the adversary… or against one of his companions? There was no answer to that, although Sunny doubted that either Slayer or Kai could have survived his assault.  
  
The three Snow figures were dead, and he was missing an arm. So… unless it was Kai who had bitten it off in his dragon form, Sunny was inclined to believe that he had clashed with the Cursed Demon and the two Monsters, instead.  
  
He glanced at Kai peculiarly. Kai noticed it and forced out a smile. "What?"  
  
Sunny lingered for a while, then shook his head. "Nothing. Just wondering how sharp your teeth are?"  
  
Kai touched his lips, then blinked a couple of times and looked away.  
  
The problem was that the shades of the three Snow abominations were not in Sunny's soul. Which meant that, although they were dead, he had not killed them - and neither had Slayer. So how the hell had they died?  
  
Sunny folded the wings he had manifested and landed on a rock outcropping at the edges of the lake of lava - too close to the misty shore of the sea of clouds to feel comfortable. Kai landed nearby, and the two of them stared at the enormous corpse in front of them.  
  
Or rather, a half of it. The Cursed Monster was unmistakably dead. It was an indescribable monstrosity that was vaguely humanoid in form, with myriad eyes littering the malformed dome of its grotesque head. It had a gaunt, pale torso and too many arms, each ending in a set of traumatic claws… as for the lower part of his body, there was no saying how it looked. It was missing. Sunny could swear that the detestable face of the fallen deity had frozen in a grimace of horror.  
  
He glanced at Kai and shivered. "Any idea how it died?"  
  
Kai remained silent for a moment, then said stiffly: "Well, I am pretty sure that it died from being torn in half." That was pretty indisputable logic.  
  
…Well, actually, it wasn't. A Cursed Monster would not have been killed by something as mundane as being torn in half. Neither would it have been terrified in its last seconds.  
  
Feeling a cold shiver run down his spine, Sunny forced out a pale smile. "Are there soul shards inside?"  
  
Kai nodded slowly. "I see one. But, if you don't mind… I'd prefer it if we don't try to dig it out just yet."  
  
Sunny scoffed, then grimaced and pressed a hand against his wounds. "Yeah. Let's not, just yet."  
  
There was another corpse they had to take a look at, almost exactly on the other side of the shattered volcano. Flying there took them a little bit of time, and when they reached the colossal remains, Sunny just stared at them with a peculiar expression.  
  
The second corpse… had turned out to not be the second corpse. Instead, it was the lower half of the Cursed Monster they had already investigated. There was no explanation as to how it ended up all the way on the opposite side of the lake of lava, and no additional clues as to how the creature had died. Neither was there any trace left of the second Cursed Monster. It had simply vanished, as if it had never existed at all… just like the Snow Demon had.  
  
Maybe their bodies had drowned in the lava, maybe they had fallen into the sea of clouds. Possibly they had simply ceased to exist for some unknown reason. Anything could have happened, really.  
  
Sunny took a shaky breath. "Let's… let's explore more. We might find something else."  
  
And so they did.  
  
In truth, he did not really hope to find more clues. He simply wanted to get away from the mangled remains of the Cursed Monster and do something to occupy his rattled mind. Sunny and Kai spent some time exploring the lake of lava. They studied the eerie, half-formed sculptures of volcanic rock protruding from it here and there. Being close to them gave both an eerie and unpleasant feeling, so they proceeded tо investigate the shores of the lake instead.  
  
Eventually, they did find something.  
  
"Well, what would you know?" Sunny landed on a small island of cooled lava and looked down incredulously.  
  
He seemed to have found his missing arm. It was still encased in the black carapace of the Jade Mantle, laying in the middle of a vast web of cracks that stretched from one edge of the small isle to another. The hand was missing a couple of fingers, but those that remained were still clenched into a fist.  
  
His severed hand was holding onto something. Sunny crouched near it and tried to pick up an impossibly thin piece of torn string that protruded from the mangled fist. He failed at first, and only succeeded after putting some Will into his touch.  
  
The string was infinitely fine, but also unbelievably durable, almost impossible to tear or cut. It resembled a single thread of black silk, or maybe a single string of a frightening spider web. All he knew was that at some point in the past two days, he had lost an arm while trying to cut that thread.  
  
Looking at Kai, Sunny remained silent for a while, and then asked in a subdued tone: "So… what do you think happened to us?"  
  
Kai's expression was deeply disturbed. He shook his head faintly, then said quietly: "I don't know."  
  
Sunny let out a long sigh. "Well, I have a couple of ideas."  
  
But really, he was in complete darkness, just as full of dоubt as Kai.  
  
That Cursed Demon… it must have been some kind of Mind Demon, if such things existed at all. Whatever Kai beheld on the snowy mountain might have been simply its vessel, while the Demon itself might have been a being of neither flesh nor spirit. It might have been like an idea, instead.  
  
At least that was what Sunny imagined after witnessing all these unexplainable things. In any case, Sunny and Kai had fallen under the influence of the Demon… had maybe become its new vessels, even. They would have been simply debilitated at first, then fully taken once the morning of the attack came. Slayer must have restrained them before that, but that was as much as she could do.  
  
How had she defeated the Demon and the two Monsters, then? Sunny did not know.  
  
He vaguely suspected that the strings Kai had seen were how the Snow Tyrant controlled the rest of its figures. So, by severing one of those strings, Sunny must have liberated one of the abominations - the Cursed Demon itself, possibly - from under the Tyrant's control. Which meant that he had been resisting whatever had happened to him at least to some degree. Maybe?  
  
He must have.  
  
And then…  
  
There was no knowing what had happened then. Possibly the Demon itself had killed the Monsters. Maybe Slayer had somehow incited and dodged it until the sun rose above the horizon.  
  
If the Demon had failed to eliminate the Ash figures and stayed on a black square after the end of its move… Who knew what could have become of it?  
  
Nobody did. It was a complete mystery, and a frightening one, at that.  
  
Sunny was in pain, tired, and deeply disturbed. He did not even want to admit how disturbed he was - it was to the point that missing an arm seemed a minor thing in comparison.  
  
Picking up his arm from the stone, he turned and glanced at Kai with a somewhat lost expression. "You know… I have never lost a limb before. This is a first."  
  
Kai smiled weakly. "Really? I would hаve thought…"  
  
Sunny shook his head. He wanted to add something like "well, unless you count the head as a limb", but remained silent instead. He was not in the mood for that.  
  
Eventually, he said in a concerned tone: "Really. I guess… we've won, though? Should we be happy?"  
  
Kai did not answer.  
  
Sunny did not speak for a while, either.  
  
Somehow, this particular victory - if it could even be called that - made him feel more troubled than any defeat.