2409 End Game  
  
The Snow Tyrant was dead, and the game was over.  
  
Sunny could feel a subtle pressure, as if the realm of Ariel's Game was rejecting him. He suspected that it would expel him soon enough, but actually, he had no idea what exactly would happen. The figures placed on the board by Weaver and Ariel had stayed in place for thousands of years, waiting for new players to arrive - but they never did, forcing the captive Tyrants to take matters into their own hands.  
  
The two daemons had never finished the game, either. Ariel had simply surrendered when pushed into a hopeless situation. So, there was no telling what would happen next.  
  
Would Sunny have to seek a way out of Ariel's Game himself? Considering the sensation of rejection he felt, it did not seem so. Would he be freed from his role as the Ash Tyrant and returned to Ravenheart, then? What about his figures? What about the remaining figures of the defeated side? Would the two Cursed Devils stay imprisoned in the Death Game, or would they be liberated from their roles as well? Would they be purged by the distressing entity dwelling beneath the clouds, instead? He did not know.  
  
But come hell or high water, he had to hurry and get his prize. 'Hell or high water, huh.' Gods knew that Sunny had experienced his fair share of hells, and his fair share of harrowing bodies of water as well.  
  
"Find the figurine, Kai!" He ignored the pain in his broken arm and torn chest, turning to look at the peak of the mountain. There had to be an entrance to the Snow Castle somewhere up there. Sunny cast his shadow sense into the depths of the mountain, feeling a sense of urgency. Yes, he did not know what was going to happen. But something was telling him that they did not have a lot of time left.  
  
The expelling pressurе was mounting, and Sunny already had to exert his will in order to stay rooted in the miniature realm of Ariel's Game. The huge body of the Puppeteer loomed above him, hiding tantalizing treasures. The wings of the great moth could be used to craft incredible armor and garments, its limbs could be forged into god-slaying weapons, and the five soul shards hidden somewhere in the depths of its corpse could become anchors for the spellweave of immensely powerful Memories. But there was no time to harvest any of these sacred relics. Even if there were. Sunny was not sure that he would have. He had seen how the world itself seemed to have been tainted аnd corrupted by drops of Puppeteer's ichor.  
  
Was it really a good idea, to covet its treasures, even in death? It was as if even the corpse of the fallen deity was a source of unceasing Corruption. Perhaps these treasures were not sacred, but cursed instead. So, the only thing Sunny wanted to find was the jade figurine of the Snow Tyrant. He needed to hurry. He had already gained a lot by defeating the Spirit of Doubt, anyway.  
  
The Puppeteer's shade was now in his Soul Sea. He had mastered the fifth step of Shadow Dance, as well. Granted, using this mastery was a terribly dangerous affair - it had almost cost Kai his life, after all. But even if Sunny abstained from performing the Fifth Step in the future, he would still reap the benefits of having mastered it.  
  
Because Serpent had to have become a Supreme Titan as a result. And if Sunny did become a carrier of the Nightmare Spell again one day, who knew? A shiny new Aspect Legacy Relic could be waiting for him, ready to be claimed. And there was Slayer, as well. Sunny might have been lost in the form of the Jade Titan, but he had not missed her destroying the shade of Condemnation. After all this time, Slayer had hunted down her prey, after all. 'So persistent.'  
  
Unlike the Wolf, however, whose shade had returned to the lightless expanse of his soul after being destroyed, Condemnation was simply gone. It was absorbed by the murderous Shadow, somehow, almost like a sacrifice she had made to herself. After that, Slayer simply vanished. Just like Saint and other Shadows would vanish to return to the nurturing dark flames of Sunny's soul and undergo an evolution. 'Slayer, is evolving?'  
  
Would she gain a higher Rank? A higher Class? Maybe even unseal her Aspect? He was both excited by that prospect and wary of it.  
  
Sunny felt excitement for obvious reasons, since the more powerful his Shadows were, the more powerful he himself would become. His wariness was also easy to understand. 'Ah, Our weekly duels, are about to become way more bothersome, aren't they?'  
  
Still, this was a boon he had received in the battle against the Puppeteer, too. He glanced at the head of the giant moth silently.  
  
Sunny used to think that the Mountain King had been the final form of the Puppeteer Worm. But now that he had met the Spirit of Doubt, he knew that he had been wrong. Thе Mountain King had never been the Puppeteer, and neither had it been one of the Puppeteer's kin. Rather, he was merely a discarded chrysalis that a worm of doubt had left behind once, a long time ago, after using it as a host to mature into a harrowing moth. A mortal king who had become infected by doubt and turned into a monster, unleashing a distressing curse upon the world.  
  
That curse continued to grow and mature until it became the Spirit of Doubt, Puppeteer. And now, it was dead.  
  
If Sunny was honest with himself, he still couldn't believe that he had won. That he had killed a Cursed Tyrant, and one as insidious as the Puppeteer had been, at that. Granted, he and his companions were so perfectly matched against the sinister moth that it almost seemed like that entire clash had been arranged by someone for their benefit. If it had been. Sunny did not have to guess by whom. 'Weaver.'  
  
Just how deep did the influence of the nebulous daemon go? What had the Demon of Fate longed to achieve? Were all them, merely puppets dancing to the movement of the strings tied to Weaver's seven clawed fingers? The Strings of Fate.  
  
"Found it!" Kai flew across withering silk, landing in a storm of snow near Sunny. The jade figurine lay on his palm, wearing a crown. Sunny smiled weakly.  
  
"Yeah, I found it, as well." Out there, in the depths of the mountain, his shadow sense discovered a gigantic cavern, and a castle built within it out of ice.  
  
The cocoon of black silk had entirely fallen apart by now. The mountain was quaking, the fractures covering its slopes growing wider. Something was moving beneath the clouds. Sunny strained his will, forcing himself to stay rooted in the world that wanted to expel him, and grabbed Kai by the shoulder. "Let's go!"  
  
With that, he used the last of his essence and pulled them both into the shadows. The enormous cavern was coming undone, great chunks of ice falling down from its ceiling and shattering into myriad shards with deafening roars. None of them were able to damage the castle that stood in the center of the cavern, though. It looked almost exactly like the Ash Castle, only made of ice and shrouded in snow. Sunny did not waste any time studying the nuances of its architecture, though, pulling himself and Kai directly into the vast hollow emptiness of the main keep.  
  
There, snow covered the floor instead of ash. Most of the great ice chamber was filled with innumerable threads of black silk, however, which blocked the path like a web. These ones did not seem to be withering, yet, and retained their startling durability. Sunny could have cut a path through the web of black silk if he wanted to, but he was grievously wounded, on the verge of essence exhaustion, and pressed for time on top of that. So, he simply shoved as much silk as he could into his Soul Sea, clearing a narrow tunnel to the heart of the chamber.  
  
There, a jade altar stood in front of a circular pit. There was no smoke rising from the pit, and no lava seething deep below. Instead, there was only a bottomless dark well permeated by killing cold. The cold was somewhat bearable near the altar, but deep in the darkness, nothing could survive its frigid embrace. Not even a Supreme Titan like Sunny.  
  
"Hurry." He limped to the pit, dragging Kai along. The pressure Ariel's Game exerted on him, trying to remove him from the game board, continued to mount - by now, Sunny had to strain all of his willpower to resist it, and his endurance was rapidly running out. 'Argh.'  
  
When they reached the dark pit, Sunny hesitated for a moment and glanced at his hand. There, two jade figurines lay side by side - one pristine and wearing a crown, the other bestial and smeared in blood. They were the figures of the Puppeteer and the Rat King. Sunny felt that what he had come for - the fragment of Weaver's Lineage - was hidden in the Snow Tyrant figurine. The other one could still reveal a priceless truth to him, though. It was an invaluable treasure, a piece of inheritance left behind by Ariel, the Demon of Dread.  
  
Still, he forced himself to pick up the Snow Beast figurine and offer it to Kai. "Here, you deserved it. Take it."  
  
Kai stared at the blood-smeared figurine for a while, tempted deeply by its promise. His eyes shook. But then, he smiled faintly and shook his head. "No, it will be of more use to you."  
  
Sunny studied him silently, then asked tensely: "Are you sure? This thing, it reveals truths. Any truth - anything you ever wanted to know, anything you ever wished to find an answer to. Yes, I know that you have suffered too much truth because of your Flaw, but still, you will not get a chance like this again."  
  
Kai's remained quiet for a moment. Eventually, his smile widened a little. "I know. But, I have already learned a lot during this journey. I have learned so much. So, I'm good, I think. I already know everything I need to know. Thank you, though - I appreciate it."  
  
Sunny stared at him for a few seconds, then nodded and glanced away with a sigh. "You're a weirdo, you know that?"  
  
Kai laughed. "Takes one to know one."  
  
Sunny took a deep breath and tried to smile, as well. "See you on the other side, then."  
  
With that, he tossed both figurines into the pit and prepared himself. As the jade figures fell into the darkness, he remembered the previous times he absorbed fragments of Weaver's Lineage. It had hurt like hell each time. In fact, it was some of the worst pain Sunny had ever experienced.  
  
A pale smile twisted his lips. "Oh, by the way. If I start screaming and writhing in pain, pay it no heed. Just make sure that I don't bite off my tongue or claw out my eyes, if it's not too much trouble. Well, one eye might be okay."  
  
Kai blinked. "Huh? Wait, what?"  
  
But Sunny did not hear him. Because he was already someplace else. He was receiving his рrize.