2325 Crystal Hive.  
  
Although Sunny insinuated that he was not going to join the battle, in truth, he knew that he would have to. His carefree demeanor was nothing but a facade.  
The situation was quite bleak.  
  
In the west, the enormous worm had finally emerged from the billowing wall of snow. Its massive head reached the ethereal glass bridge, and as its pale body rippled, the Cursed Beast speedily crawled across the abyss of gilded clouds. The clouds were painted in vibrant shades of gold and magenta, while the gossamer bridge glistened in the sunlight. The sight of it was as gorgeous as the Snow Worm was grotesque.  
  
Its massive body extended and extended from the snowstorm, already spanning several kilometers in length. And yet, Sunny still could not see its tail. In fact, he had a peculiar feeling that he might not see it at all, as if the Cursed One's body defied the concept of finality.  
As if the length of the ghastly Nightmare Creature was simply infinite, becoming as great as it needed to be. A Beast like that could probably devour the roots of an entire realm.  
  
And yet, Sunny felt far more pressured by the clockwork giant marching across the fantastical bridge of glasslike snow in the east. Now that the creature had drawn closer, he could discern a few details of its appearance. The giant did, indeed, look somewhat similar to the toy knights they had seen in the Jade Palace. However, that similarly was shallow.  
  
The Nightmare Creature was clearly a construct, its massive body assembled from wood, brass, and weathered hide, shaped to resemble a mighty warrior wearing a suit of heavy armor. Thousands of scars marred its surface, as if the giant had survived a myriad of terrifying battles, as if it had survived every war that had ever been waged, felling myriad enemies with its sword.  
The giant did not resemble a toy at all, if anything, it resembled a training dummy that had served some warmongering deity before coming alive and subsequently succumbing to Corruption. Maybe it had.  
  
The giant was marching across the bridge with measured, heavy steps, and even from a great distance, Sunny felt pressured by the unhurried inevitability of its approach. Luckily, the two Cursed Ones were heading for the two volcanoes that Kai and Slayer had abandoned.  
  
The detestable Ice Hive, however, was heading directly for the Ash Castle.  
  
By now, the first of the crystalline abominations were already emerging from the vast network of caves they had perforated the mountain with. Their transparent bodies seemed to ignite under the sun, shining with reflected light. The first few were already on the glass bridge - they stopped, shоok the snow and ice of their crystal carapaces and then leaped into the air. Translucent wings unfurled behind them, glowing like golden panes of stained glass.  
  
'Great. So they can fly, too?'  
  
Behind a veneer of nonchalance, Sunny felt concerned. He continued to craft arrows while observing the adversary through the shadows.  
  
As soon as the first of them rose into the air, its wing shattered, broken by Kai's arrow. The Nightmare Creature plummeted down, doomed to disappear into the sea of clouds - before it could, however, two of its kin swooped in, tearing the struggling beast apart and devouring its crystalline flesh. Sunny frowned.  
  
'Not quick enough.'  
  
Kai and Slayer were like a two-man… well, one man and one shadow lady… artillery battery. The amount of devastation two Transcendent archers could unleash was truly frightening. With each shot, hurricane winds rose and ravaged the slopes of the towering volcano, making the ground shake. Roaring thunderclaps tore apart the silence, making Sunny's ears ring.  
  
And they were rapid, too. When he imagined what the two of them could have done to the great alloy ramparts of Falcon Scott, he felt a chill run down his spine.  
  
Slayer rapidly killed several abominations, piercing their crystalline bodies without discrimination. Kai, however, had learned his lesson and tried to aim for more vulnerable spots, like the wings or the eyes. He managed to send a few insect-like Beasts plummeting into the clouds, as well - two of them were torn apart by their siblings, while the third landed on the ethereal bridge and scurried across its surface, only to die half a dozen moments later when Slayer's arrow pinned it to the glistening glass.  
  
Thinking back to the battle against Asuras of Condemnation, Sunny was surprised by how efficient the two archers were in slaying Great Beasts. And yet, their startling lethality was nowhere near enough to prevent the Ice Hive from reaching the volcano, let alone annihilate it. At best, they would dispose of a couple dozen of the eerily gorgeous crystalline abominations before being forced to engage them in melee.  
And once the swarm of Great Beasts descended upon them, they would be overwhelmed in a matter of moments.  
  
Sunny had to prevent that from happening. However, even Sunny himself was not sure that he could contend against scores of Great Beasts. Perhaps if he had his shadows with him and could amplify his body, he would have stood a better chance.  
  
Alone as he was, however, Sunny was only marginally stronger than each individual crystal Nightmare Creature. He had some advantages thanks to his Aspect, naturally, but while it was enough to face a dozen or two Great Beasts, fighting the entire hive could easily get him killed.  
  
'Fighting against overwhelming odds, a hair's breadth away from death… ah, how nostalgic…'  
  
Sunny's expression crumpled. He would rather not revisit this particular part of his tumultuous past. There had to be some trick, some strategy he could come up with.  
  
There was about half a minute left before the dwellers of the Ice Hive reached the volcano. Great Beasts could move with startling speed, but Kai and Slayer were aiming for the swiftest ones first - so, the abominations were slower to reach their target than they would have been otherwise.  
  
'I have thirty moments to come up with a plan.'  
  
Sunny began to craft another arrow and then rushed forward, grabbed Slayer, and pulled her into the shadows.  
  
'Kai, dodge!'  
  
Kai was already in the air by the time Sunny finished the sentence. In the next moment, the slope of the volcano exploded, drowning in vicious white radiance and incinerating heat.