2337 Actionable Strategy  
The sun was rolling toward the horizon, so Sunny and his companions left the dark interior оf the Ash Castle and scaled the slopes of the caldera once again. The pillar of smoke rising into the sky gave birth to billowing black clouds, and flakes of ash were falling down like snow.  
The last volcano surrounded by snow-covered mountains from all sides, and their pristine white peaks loomed oppressively in the distance.  
  
While Kai and Slayer were preparing for battle, Sunny assessed his army. He had a Saint, a Transcendent Shadow, and two dozen Supreme shades at his disposal. Each individual Obsidian Wasp was powerful and lethal, but peculiarly enough, Kai and Slayеr - the Ash Beasts - were much more lethal than the shades despite their inferior Rank. And, naturally, there was Sunny himself - the Ash Tyrant.  
With a sigh, Sunny drew the map of Ariel's Game in the ash again and studied it with a concerned expression.  
Kai fastened the black quiver to the sash of his ivory armour and glanced at him questioningly.  
'You seem troubled?'  
Sunny nodded slowly.  
'I am, a little. By now, we know a lot about how this realm works - enough to plan a strategy, at least. However, there are still two questions that are left unanswered. One of them is somewhat important, but the other one is vital.' He pointed to the map. 'First of all, while we have some idea what the Castles and the Shrines do, the special square at the very heart of the board is still a mystery. Much more importantly, though, we don't know if there is a difference between how figures move. For example, we don't know if some figures can move diagonally between the mountains or cross several peaks in one move.' He sighed. 'Well, if they can, there is no point in making strategies. We will be surrounded in no time, no matter what we try to do… then, it will just be a fight to the death.'  
He glanced at the map and narrowed his eyes. 'If we assume that all figures can only move one square at a time, though… then, it is quite obvious what we must do.'  
  
On the grid in front of him, the Snow Tyrant was guarded in the northern Castle by a Snow Demon and two Beasts. One Snow Devil guarded the center of the board, while the second one guarded the Eastern Shrine with two Monsters. Three Snow Beasts surrounded the Ash Castle, while the last Snow Demon was alone in the south-western corner.  
Which meant that the Western Shrine was left unguarded.  
Sunny pointed to it. 'We need to гeach that square, entrench ourselves, and kill as numerous enemies there as we can. The problem, naturally, is that the Snow Demon in the left corner can get to it much faster… oh, and that we are surrounded by Snow Beasts from all sides.' He smiled dаrkly.  
'So, we need to kill one of them before they attack us from all sides come dawn.'  
He would have preferred to spare all three Snow Beasts to kill them later at the Shrine, but the situation left him with little choice. He had to break the blockade around the Ash Castle tonight, before the snow worm and the clockwork giant received a chance to attack the Ash Castle from west and east simultaneously.  
So, the only real choice Sunny had was which of the three Snow Beasts to attack. Naturally, finishing off the Ice Hive was the easiest choice, which was not to say that it would be easy. That said, he would rather deal with one of the Cursed Ones first. Sadly, he could not.  
Launching an attack on the mountain conquered by the ghastly worm would bring him too close to the Snow Demon in the far west, while challenging the fearsome giant would take him further away from the Western Shrine, well on his way to being caught by the group of Snow figures guarding the Eastern Shrine. So, only one choice remained.  
Sunny glanced at the two Shrines, suddenly remembering the four words carved into each side of the jade board. Snow, Ash, Fear, Truth.  
Suddenly, he realized that the rune of Ash was carved just below the square where, as he knew now, the Ash Castle stood. The rune of Snow was directly opposite, under the square where the Snow Castle stood. The Shrine that the Snow Demon guarded… was it the Shrine of Fear, then? Which meant that the Shrine Sunny wanted to occupy was the Shrine of Truth.  
He smiled. 'How fitting.'  
  
His hair was disheveled, so he tied it back with a band made of shadows. Then, Sunny moved his shoulders, stretching them before the battle.  
'Prepare yourselves. We are going to wipe out the Ice Hive from existence today.'  
While somewhat unfortunate, it was not a bad choice. That way, at least, Sunny would gather more shades before facing the truly powerful Snow Abominations further down the line. Just as he spoke those words, the sun finally touched the distant horizon. Its radiance turned vibrant red, painting the sea of clouds with a thousand shades of scarlet, crimson, and carmine.  
It was as if the lonesome mountains were rising from a sea of blood.  
The volcano shook. Then, it roared, and the pillar of smoke rising from its depths swelled, growing wider and more voluminous. The clouds of ash above them boiled.  
A powerful wind blew from the south, scattering the ash and carrying it north, west, and east. Just as it had happened with the snow, the plumes of ash reached across the glowing red abyss of sunlit clouds, absorbing the intense radiance of the eventide. Soon enough, the tendrils of ash solidified into huge obsidian bridges, which glowed with the reflected light of the setting sun as if imbued with burning embers.  
  
It was a pretty sight.  
Sunny inhaled deeply, then commanded his troops forward.  
',Attack.''