2338 Dire Penalty  
  
Sunny jumped down to the surface of the obsidian bridge, testing it carefully. The bridge was hundreds of metеrs across and dozens of kilometers long, arching gracefully above the glowing sea of crimson clouds. It was not monolithic, but rather an airy and ethereal structure of chaotically interwoven streams of obsidian that glanced far more fragile and delicate than it was supposed to be.  
  
In truth, Sunny suspected that even if he had access to his full titanic strength, he would not be able to put a dent in the obsidian bridge. So, he did not have to worry about it collapsing beneath him.  
Turning into a shadow, he glided across the smooth obsidian with great speed. Sunlight burned in the depths of the volcanic glass like embers, and the winds howled above.  
  
Kai and Slayer followed behind, escorted by the insect - like shades.  
  
He could have carried them all to the distant mountain through the shadows, but there was a possibility that they had gotten the rules of Ariel's Game wrong, and that the being dwelling beneath the clouds would react negatively to the Ash Domain advancing. So, Sunny wanted to leave himself a chance to react and retreat in case that happened. Luckily, nothing of the sort transpired. This was good news for Sunny, since he planned to rely heavily on their ranged advantage when dealing with the Ice Hive.  
  
The mountain was perforated by countless tunnels that formed a complicated network. Besieging the Crystal Wasps in their home would be quite a treacherous affair, so Sunny wanted to lure at least some of them out first.  
  
Kai's new arrow was going to be of great help, in that regard. Since it could phase through solid matter, he could use it to wound the Snow Abominations while they were hiding in the depths of their ice fortress - enough so to send them into a rage, at least.  
  
Sunny had half - expected that the Crystal Wasps would hurry to the surface themselves, forming a solar array to bombard the attackers with gigantic beams of incinerating light while they crossed the bridge, but that did not happen either. The nightmare creatures seemed quite comfortable waiting for the adversary in the depths of the Hive, where they had both the terrain and the numerical advantage.  
  
However, Sunny's plаn met a different obstacle. Just a few moments after stepping on the bridge, he suddenly emerged from the shadows and swayed, a strained expression on his face.  
  
'Ah… that feels awful.'  
  
He expected that attacking a square of the Snow Domain would weaken him, just like the Cгystal Wasps had been weakened when attacking the Ash Castle. However, he did not know just how severe the penalty would be.  
  
Sunny felt sapped of his vitality, frail and feeble, as if he had aged several decades in a single moment. His body was weakened, while his soul was frozen, the essence circulating sluggishly as the rate at which it was replenished fell drastically.  
  
Behind him, Kai staggered in the air, while Slayer came to an abrupt halt and slid across the obsidian surface, keeping her balance with the grace of a dancer. Her eyes remain cold and menacing, but her brow curved in a subtle scowl. Even the Obsidian Wasps seemed to slow down.  
  
Sunny looked back, at the ashen slopes of the fuming volcano, wondering if the weakening hex would be removed if they returned. Kai and Slayer had already shown that they can hit targets on the distant mountain from the edge of the caldera, after all… so, crawling back to start a purely ranged assault was a possibility.  
  
It was not a very good decision, though, because it would take Kai numerous hours to significantly reduce the number of enemies from that far, let alone to eradicate the Ice Hive completely - if that was even possible. And the time they had to conquer the snowy peak would run out as soon as the sun disappeared behind the horizon.  
  
Sunny frowned. They were close to the middle of the obsidian bridge, just about to escape from under the clouds of ash and see a clear sky.  
  
Looking at Kai, he said evenly:  
  
'Kai, try wounding one of them from here.'  
  
The charming аrcher landed on the glowing obsidian and retrieved the enchanted arrow from his quiver. The crystal arrowhead glistened as he nocked it on the string, and then…  
  
Nothing happened.  
  
Kai struggled with his bow for a few seconds, muttering something to himself, then lowered it with a complicated expression and looked at Sunny.  
  
'I… can't.'  
  
He grimaced.  
  
'I can't draw my bow. It's too heavy.'  
  
Sunny blinked a few times.  
  
'Curse it all.'  
  
So that was what it meant to be suppressed by the Snow Domain, which spanned forty - eight out of forty - nine peaks of Ariel's Game. Or rather, that was what it meant to attack a mountain surrounded by the Snow Domain from all sides except for one.  
  
Sunny sighed, knowing that his plan had gone belly up. He could potentially manipulate the black bow to make it easier to draw, but that would not help the situation - any weaker, and Kai would not even be able to scratch the Crystal Wasps, let alone kill them. Slayer was in a somewhat better position, but she was not going to be of great help either. Both of them were Transcendent, and weakened even further by the Snow Domain, facing scores of Great Beasts in battle would be a tall task for them.  
  
'I might have underestimated how important the role of the Domains is in this game.'  
  
So… what was he supposed to do?  
  
Kai seemed to be thinking the same.  
  
'What do we do, Sunny?'  
  
Sunny remained silent for a few seconds, then looked at the distant mountain with a concerned expression. There was only one thing left to do, really. He smiled chillingly.  
  
'...You two make sure that none of them escape.'  
  
Kai raised an eyebrow, confused.  
  
'Escape? Escape from what?'  
  
Sunny took a step forward, summoning the helmet of the Jade Mantle. His low voice sounded even when he spoke.  
  
'...From me.'  
  
With that, he suddenly disappeared, taking the Obsidian Wasps with him. Kai and Slayer were left alone on the bridge, bathed in the scarlet radiance of the setting sun.  
  
Almost at the same time, the shadows within the Ice Hive stirred, surging forward, and a fearsome figure encased in an armor of inky - black jade stepped out of them, facing a rattled Crystal Wasp like an omen of death.