2341 Cloud of Ash  
The floor of the cavern was littered with fragments of shattered crystal. Sunny had recalled the Obsidian Wasps back into the dark depths of his soul and dismissed his helmet, inhaling the frigid air deeply. Now that the sounds of the slaughter had ceased, the melodious tinkling of the crystal wind chimes permeated the silence once more.  
  
He exhaled slowly, knowing that the soothing melody would be erased from existence before too long, as well. 'Not bad, for my first move.' He had taken one of the Snow figures off the board.  
Taking a few steps forward, shards of crystal crunching under his feet, Sunny used the blade of his odachi to sweep some of them away. This was where he had killed the last of the Crystal Wasps, and so…'There.'  
  
Crouching, he reached down and picked up a jade figurine from beneath the shards. It was the Snow Beast figure - one representing the Ice Hive. Sunny studied it for a few seconds, then hid it inside his armor.  
Then, with no more time to waste, he stepped through the shadows and returned to the cave where water was flowing into a deep pool from a forest of crystal stalactites. Manifesting a large cauldron, he hastily filled it with clear water and pulled it into the shadows, appearing on the slopes of the snowy mountain a few seconds later.  
  
Kai and Slayer were already waiting for him there, the last rays of the setting sun painting their silhouettes with fiery shades of scarlet. Sunny offered them a friendly smile and brought some water to his lips, drinking greedily. 'Ah,' 'I guess it's not poisoned.'  
Then, he raised an eyebrow. 'What?' Kai had been staring at him with wide eyes.  
  
The charming archer shook his head slowly. 'N - no, nothing. It's just… they were Great Beasts. All… all fifty of them…' His gaze could penetrate solid rock, so he must have seen exactly how Sunny had dealt with the Crystal Wasps.  
Sunny grinned. 'Were they? An expected result, then. It would be a shame if I couldn't do this much as a Supreme, after all, I killed my first Great Devil as a Sleeper!'  
  
Finally, he found a chance to work this one in! Kai's eyes shook. …And a moment later, the mountain shook, as well.  
Sunny sighed, then glanced at his friend languidly. 'I suggest you brace yourself.'  
  
Kai frowned. 'Brace myself? For wh…' Just then, the sun finally disappeared behind the horizon, and the peak of the mountain exploded with a deafening roar. A towering pillar of smoke and ash rose into the sky, expanding into a mushroom cloud.  
Sunny remained nonchalant as a great fireball bloomed behind him, and a wave of scorching wind broke against his back. 'For that.'  
The mountain shook and shook, as if convulsing. Its entire peak was obliterated by the explosion, stone shrapnel and jagged boulders raining from above. A billowing mass of ash was expelled into the sky and spread, obscuring it like a veil of billowing darkness. Great plates of snow were dislodged and slid down, turning into destructive avalanches…  
Then, the slope of the mountains split, and a flood of luminous lava flowed from its shattered peak, evaporating the snow. Sunny watched the obsidian bridges turn into torrents of ash as he erected a bulwark of shadows higher on the slope, making the lava flow past the narrow stretch of rock where he, Kai, and Slayer stood.  
  
He gestured to the cauldron. 'How about a drink to celebrate our victory?' Kai gave him a long look, then scooped some water and drank deeply.  
Before too long, the snowy mountain was gone, replaced by a fuming volcano. The peak had turned into a vast caldera. The snow melted, revealing weathered rock, and the rock was covered by a layer of falling ash…  
The network of tunnels created by the Crystal Wasps had been destroyed entirely. Most of the tunnels collapsed, while those that remained were now filled with cooled magma.  
Night fell, submerging the artificial realm of Ariel's Game in darkness.  
  
If there was one flaw to the newly established volcano, it was that there was no fortress here for them to hide from the falling ash. So, instead, Sunny created a simple house out of manifested shadows, complete with a few items of crude furniture. There was a desk, a few chairs, and a bed. He even manifested a blanket and a couple of pillows. He did not need to sleep just yet, but Kai could probably use a bit of proper rest.  
  
So, Sunny sent the charming archer to bed and sat at the desk, creating more arrows for him. Slayer stayed outside, guarding their makeshift home… even though they had never been as safe as they were here, in Ariel's Game, for as long as the sun was hidden behind the horizon. 'I wonder what they'll do at dawn?'  
Sunny had hoped that the Snow Worm and the Clockwork Giant would move to conquer the Ash Castle, but now that he thought about it, that was pointless. After all, the special nature of Castles was that the squares they stood upon never changed color. So, they could not be truly conquered.  
  
That meant that the two Snow Beasts would probably pursue him north. 'Will we have to fight one or both of them to reach the Shrine?' That would be unfortunate, since Sunny wanted to kill them as a sacrifice to Ariel's Game.  
He briefly considered tossing the figure of the Snow Beast in his possession into the vent of the newly created volcano, but decided аgainst it in the end. There was no altar in front of the main vent here, so he would probably not receive a revelation by doing so.  
  
In the morning, the rising sun turned snow into glass bridges again. Sunny, Kai, and Slayer watched the Clockwork Giant walk across one to the Ash Castle, while the Snow Worm crawled back to the mountain where its nest had been, directly west of the newly created volcano.  
Sunny sighed. They were boxed in, soon to be corralled. The Snow Worm blocked the way west, while moving east would lead them away from the Western Shrine. That only left the northern direction…  
  
But if there, after one move, they would be surrounded by two Snow Beasts from west and south… and a Snow Devil from the north.  
He winced. 'What a bother.'