2343 Game of the World Tree  
Kai was so stunned that he did not even react to that last statement. The three of them simply remained still for a while, observing the magnificent sight of the enormous tree.  
  
The bark of the tree was dark, while its branches were bare and shrouded in snow. Its branches were like a frozen nebula, while the tree itself was like the axis of the world, rising above the sea of clouds much higher than even the surrounding mountains. Sunny could not see its roots, but he suspected that it was at least ten times taller than the Soul Devourer had been at its peak.  
Of course, it was still infinitely smaller than the inconceivable tree whose stump he had witnessed at the heart of the Burned Forest.  
  
Eventually, Kai exhaled and said slowly:  
'It's like I'm looking at a world tree.'  
Sunny shook his head.  
'I've seen the actual world tree once. It is located north of the Forgotten Shore, and all that remains of it is an unfathomably enormous stump. This one… well, maybe it's a sapling of the world tree.'  
  
He studied the tree for a while, then said with a hint of doubt in his voice:  
'Perhaps it is. We don't really know what this miniature realm is made of, and if these mountains are even real. But if this tree is indeed real and is a child of the Heart God's world tree, then it might very well be the thing that holds this entire realm together. Ariel might have used it as the core of his game's world.'  
There was no evidence to prove his theory, really, but Sunny was inclined to believe it.  
  
But even if he was wrоng, just to be safe…  
'Whatever you do, Kai, don't look inside that tree.'  
The charming archer raised an eyebrow.  
'Why?'  
Sunny hesitated for a moment.  
'If it really is the central element of this world's structure, then it might very well be the source of the being beneath the clouds… or at least connected to it. Who knows what slithers deep inside that enormous trunk? You might see something that your mind can't endure.'  
Kai shivered.  
  
Sunny studied the tree a bit more, then scratched his head.  
'It does make me wonder, though. Currently, it's shrouded in snow. How the hell will it become covered in ash if we conquer it? A tree can't erupt with lava, can it?'  
He chuckled.  
Would it bloom if it was conquered by the Ash Domain? Or would it literally spew molten rock?  
The latter was not impossible. Considering the size of the giant tree, its roots could very well stretch wide and deep enough to reach the mantle of this artificial world, or maybe even its molten core… if it even had those.  
  
In any case, Sunny was more interested in something else.  
'There was a Snow Devil guarding the central square on the jade board. Can you see it?'  
Kai glanced into the distance.  
He remained silent for a while, then hurriedly glanced down.  
'Yes. I think so.'  
Sunny sighed.  
'So, what kind of horror is it this time? A bestial monstrosity with rotting flesh? An eerie, creepy wraith? No, don't tell me… it's some kind of insect, isn't it? Damnation! Why does it always have to be insects?'  
Kai lingered for a moment, then shook his head.  
'No. It… it looks like a human to me.'  
Sunny frowned.  
'A human? No, wait. Is it human, or does it look for a human?'  
Kai lingered with the answer.  
'I'm not sure. That Devil, he's just sitting there with his legs crossed. But I can't really discern any details, just… I think that he glanced back at me, too.'  
Sunny considered the new information silently.  
Devils were sentient, intelligent, and cunning. They also wielded unholy powers, much like Awakened wielded Aspect Abilities. More importantly, this particular Devil was either Great… or Cursed. The former was tolerable, but the latter was truly bad news.  
  
At that moment, Kai suddenly added:  
'There is… something peculiar about that Devil. I am not sure what it is, but I think I saw something behind him, like a string that glistened for a short second. In fact I had the same feeling when looking at the other Snow Abominations we faced, as well. All оf them are a bit peculiar.'  
Sunny gave him a dark look.  
'Hey, I am already on edge, so there's no need to say creepy things to scare me even more, okay?'  
The moon was rising above the sea of clouds, and the snow-covered branches of the enormous tree shone in its pale light.  
He sighed.  
'Damn it.'  
'Anyway. Be prepared to fight that thing, whatever it is.'  
  
This next dawn was going to be a perilous one for them. The Snow Worm and the Clockwork Giant were still two moves away, but the Snow Devil could attack the newborn volcano in one-meaning that it could attack them in the morning.  
As long as it was willing to… commanded to?  
Sunny still did not know what level of control the Snow Tyrant had over the other Snow figures. It was in the nature of Nightmare Creatures to attack beings whose souls were devoid of Corruption in a murderous frenzy, but if the Tyrant was in control of these abominations, then it could suppress their demented, overwhelming desire for a while.  
After all, Sunny was the Ash Tyгant, and he was accompanied by two Ash Beasts. They had already shown their ability to eliminate Snow figures, so the Snow Tyrant could show reluctance to send its Devil into battle alone.  
They would just have to wait and see.  
And so, they did.  
  
In the morning, as the sun rose above the horizon and illuminated the sea of clouds with radiant golden light, ethereal glass bridges connected the volcano to the surrounding mountains once more, and to the enormous tree, as well.  
Behind them, the volcano they had left yesterday was conquered by the Clockwork Giant and was covered by snow once again. To the left, the Snow Worm crawled to a new pеak and coiled around it, blocking the way west.  
And the Snow Devil…  
Remained where he was, not in a hurry to attack.  
Sunny cursed quietly.  
  
It was good news that they would not have to fight the Devil today. However, it was also terrible news, because all clues pointed to the fact that the Snow Tyrant was capable not only of controlling the Snow figures, but also of doing it strategically.  
He grimaced and glanced away from the snow-covered tree, his eyes turning a few shades darker.  
'We are going to kill that grotesque worm in the evening. Get ready.'  
It seemed that he would finally slay his first Cursed Beast.