1659 Hour of Reckoning

The skull of Sunny's battered Shell had cracked, and the upper part of it had fused with the ice. That part was torn off when he pushed what remained of his body into the fractured ice, spilling shadows like a tide of black blood.

But his jaws were still intact.

With most of his limbs gone and his colossal body swiftly turning into ice, Sunny let out a frenzied growl as he opened his skeletal maw and bit down on the small silhouette encased in the heart of the Winter Beast's appalling vessel.

Slicing it in half.

A moment later, his teeth exploded into a rain of ice. His mutilated Shell was far too damaged, and would have already crumbled if it had not been fused into ice, becoming a part of it.

His soul was cold, cold... cold enough that even the terrible pain ravaging it had been swallowed by a peaceful numbness. That peace was a herald of death.

But none of it mattered.

Because the moment Sunny destroyed the source of the Winter Beast, the abominable sculpture of Ice that served as its body shuddered.

And then, it started to crack.

He heard a gleeful laughter ring in his mind, breaking through the haze of stillness that was consuming it. Glee, triumph, vindication, pain, sorrow, guilt, hatred... countless emotions were fused into that laugh, creating an eerily disturbing mixture.

Sunny recognized the laughter as his own.

Or was it a scream?

He was laughing... because the Winter Beast was dead. There was no Nightmare Spell to celebrate his Idll, but Sunny had sensed a trickle of shadow fragments entering his soul.

The harrowing titan, Winter Beast, the bane of the Antarctic Center and the executioner of Falcon Scott, the abominable horror that had stolen the lives of Sunny's soldiers and taught him how unbearably crushing a defeat can be, was gone.

Slain by his own hand, no less.

Vengeance... was so sweet.

But that sweetness was also so indescribably bitter, because it carried the memories of what it was exactly that Sunny had longed to avenge.

'Ah...'

Imprisoned in the depths of a frozen Shell, Sunny cut off his senses for a fleeting moment.

Left alone in the darkness, he whispered:

"This... this is... this is for you."

It was for Belle, Dorn, and Samara. For Professor Obel, Sergeant Gere, and Lieutenant Carin. For numerous others who had perished in Falcon Scott.

And for Sunny himself, who had to live with the scars that the Winter Beast had left on his soul.

'Now... let's finish this!

The abominable titan was dead, but the ordeal was not quite over yet. Sunny was still trapped within the Icy tomb of the Winter Beast's vessel, and the world was still quaking all around him.

Fearing that the spreading cold would reach the very depths of the frozen Shell and swallow his soul, Sunny dismissed the dark giant. However, the broken colossus did not dissolve into shadows... eerily enough, those parts of it that had been turned to ice by the titan remained solid despite being released.

All Sunny managed to do was create a sphere of empty darkness around himself, where the cold had not yet reached. He hesitated for a split second, then summoned more shadows from the Lantern and swiftly built a new Shell in the broken remains of the old one.

The appalling figure of the Winter Beast was still half-buried in obsidian, towering above it like a hideous masterpiece of sinister art. The azure flowers were wilting. A few moments later, they caught aflame and turned to ash, disappearing into the dark winds of the underground cauldron.

A few moments more, and the cracks covering the carcass of the dreadful titan widened, and then exploded outward when two black hands tore through the ice from the inside, Sunny crawled out of the crumbling titan and allowed his second Shell to dissolve.

Now outside the body of the Winter Beast and able to use Shadow Step again, he instantly teleported some distance away, stepping on the black obsidian with bare feet.

The damage to a Shell was not transferred to the body, but the Onyx Mantle was truly in tatters. It was going to take some time for his armor to restore itself... so, for now, Sunny was left standing there in nothing but the rags of his military bodysuit. No different from how he had been when he returned to Antarctica.

He took a deep breath.

Somewhere outside, far away, the terrible snowstorm was dying down. The profane power that supported it was gone, and so, it was going to disappear without a trace before too long.

The worst of the eruption seemed to have already happened, as well. Most of the lava that had flown from Erebus had been cooled by the blizzard, solidifying into glass and stone. That said, the volcano had been terribly damaged, an entire side of it having collapsed to reveal the fiery caverns within.

Sunny suspected that, if not for the ash, he could have looked up and seen a fragment of the bleak sky even from these depths.

The ground was still quaking, but not as much as before. He waited for a bit, ignoring the sweltering heat and holding his breath in the suffocating fumes of the active volcano.

In front of him, at some distance... the corpse of the Winter Beast was slowly crumbling.

The azure flowers were gone. The pale ice was shattering, unable to withstand its own weight anymore, and melting. The desiccated corpses of the Nightmare Creatures that had been encased in it caught flame and were scattered by the wind.

Soon, it was all over.

Full of an indescribable feeling, Sunny slowly approached the place where the Winter Beast had died.

His enemy was gone, and all that remained... was a scattering of shimmering soul shards, the fragmented remains of his frozen Shell, and a barrow of pale ice.

There was no sign of the vague silhouette that he had bitten in half anywhere in sight. It must have turned to ash like the rest of the corpses fused with the abomination.

The remaining ice - what had been the innermost core of the titan's body once - was not melting, but neither was it radiating a sense of fatal cold. That cold was there, still, but now, it seemed to be contained within the ice instead of spreading outward like a curse.

In the flaming darkness of the obsidian lake, the mystical ice looked almost like frosty metal.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then sighed, coughed violently, and summoned the Covetous Coffer.

He placed everything Inside - the soul shards, the fragments of frozen shadows, and the pieces of pale ice.

"It's over."

The Winter Beast was dead. He had settled the score and avenged himself.

He had avenged everyone else, as well.

His business in Antarctica was finished.

Suddenly, Sunny looked tired.

He glanced around, his gaze a little lost, and then asked quietly:

"Now what?"

Of course, there was no response. There was no one to respond, either.

In the silence of the obsidian lake, Sunny rubbed his face tiredly and closed his eyes.

"I'm tired... of this place."

Not the depths of Mount Erebus. Not the ruins of the Erebus Field, and not even the Antarctic Center.

Sunny felt tired of this world.

Nothing was holding him back here anymore.

And so, he decided to leave,

A dozen seconds later, his figure disappeared from Inside the broken volcano..., and off the face of the Earth.

He would not return to the waking world for three long, lonesome years.