

“Hurry up, kid.” The man’s rough voice pierced his thoughts. Keisin nodded, picking up his pace as he tried to steady shaking hands. He couldn’t mess up now.

The group of fifteen trod quietly. A pair of Cedars headed the group, dark eyes narrowed in concentration as they wove the lingering strands of darkness around them into a cloak of shadow. Keisin had attempted to make conversation with the other alchemists earlier, but the only response was a red-eyed glare from a man at the front of the group.

The Willow Life Tree loomed larger as they walked, its imposing presence growing with every step. An immortal guardian of the forest. But even it did not know the burning hatred that was revenge. And even gods could fall. Impending doom and anticipation crushed down upon them, heavier than the nearly identical Ambers they bore. He was used to crafting simpler Ambers to sell for everyday usage. Small silver ones that could create a breeze, medium sized blues that produced a stream of water for cleaning, or even larger red ones that could generate a fire for cooking when broken. The Amber he carried looked similar to the latter, though large enough it required both hands to carry. A radiant orange glow pulsed beneath its polished surface. Keisin shot a smile at one of the alchemists who looked just as nervous as he was, only to be met with a scowl. They still looked down on him— but tonight he would prove them wrong.

There were a few close calls. Soldiers patrolled the paths, many of them Redwoods who could strike them with lightning at a moment’s notice. Any slip up, any stumble, could very well end in death. The taste of salt on the wind was unfamiliar, a sharp contrast to the richer scents of the forest he was from. Ashes weren’t supposed to be here. Nor were Beeches, though he was the only one of the group. The Cedars and Oaks were native to this area, and free of suspicion from the soldiers, though Keisin still wasn’t sure if he could trust them. How much had the Guild paid them to betray their own realm? But a quick glance at the Ashes dispelled his worry. Their magic ensured attempts at backstabbing would end in death by fire. It was a tenuous alliance, but the closest both sides could get.

The willow was almost large enough to blot out the entire sky at this distance, the structures built along the trunk and each of its drooping branches visible. He wondered what it was like to be one of the royal family that lived there. They must be sleeping at this time of night, oblivious to the world down below. Ignorant. Keisin shook his head, dispelling the guilt that began to creep in. They did not deserve his sympathy.

Their steps became increasingly tense, and he found himself flinching at every small movement in the darkened forest. Every cracking branch sounded like thunder, every rippling reflection mimicked the glint of armor. Hatred flickered across his face as they passed an expansive grove of bay laurels. Their branches were intertwined to form walls, making it impossible to see inside. That must be where the general lived. Was he haunted by nightmares of those felled under his command? Or did he spare no thought for those left behind to mourn the dead? Keisin's gaze lingered, he lost his balance—

Steady hands hoisted him up by the elbows inches before he hit the ground. "What did I say about being careful, kid?" It was the Cedar taking up the flank, having paused his magic to help him up.

"Careful, yeah, I can do that," Keisin tried to steady his breath.

"Hmph. Just keep—" the Cedar was hit in the chest by a bolt of lightning. He collapsed.

Keisin turned to see a soldier whose eyes were the same bright yellow as the lightning he had summoned. A Redwood. Their gazes met, equally startled to see their youth reflected in the other's eyes. They were too young to be fighting. Too young to be enemies. Too young to be caught up in this war. But there would be no mercy. The soldier raised his hand once more, the seed in his palm glowing with magic.

Fire surged past Keisin's cheek, striking the Redwood and engulfing him in flames. Keisin watched in horror as the boy writhed in agony, wooden armor doing nothing to protect him from the fire. No, not a boy. A soldier. Just another casualty. Keisin knew what it felt like to

fall at the hands of an enemy. It was almost enough to dampen the spark of sympathy within him.

“Waste of paper,” the Ash muttered as he crumpled the origami he held in his hand. It was useless now that the spell had been cast.

“There’s no time. Let’s go!” called out a woman at the front of the group. Her hand movements became increasingly elaborate to maintain the cover of shadows as a Cedar fell back to drag along their unconscious ally. As for the soldier, whether he was dead or not, there was no time to hide the body before others arrived to assess the scene. Dawn would arrive no slower than it always did. By the time everyone awoke, they had to be gone in the night. It was almost a shame. Barely anyone to witness the brilliance of what was to come.

The treeline ended, leaving only exposed clearing surrounding the trunk of the life tree. Soldiers clad in polished wooden armor milled around the exposed roots, some sparring, some eating, others conversing. The occasional shine of a steel blade could be seen in the flickering light of the campfires. He could make out some snippets of conversation. Laughter. Did they feel any remorse at all?

It would be impossible to reach the tree without being caught. But they were not here to fight. There was no reason to, not when they could go under. Five Oaks formed a ring, the seeds in their feet glowing as they performed intricate footwork, each step precise and well-practiced. The earth heeded their call, breaking away into a hole. The Cedars had already disappeared into the shadows.

Keisin stumbled into the pit, managing to keep his balance despite the weight of the Amber. It was suffocating down here. He took his last gasps of fresh air as he waited for the rest of the group to gather inside. The earth closed overhead. Darkness, then a snap, and a flame flickered into existence. Origami was crumpled and discarded as the Ash holding the fire in his hand took the lead. The Oaks danced as they moved, the three in front breaking a path through the dirt while the two behind closed the earth behind them, giving the illusion that they were

walking in place despite their constant movement. They had to be quick. Soldiers swarmed overhead, and every second was air spent.

No one made eye contact, no one broke their stride. The group maintained their unspoken pact of silence. There was no point wasting breath on conversation. His arms ached, but he refused to put down the Amber. If he did, he did not know if he would have the strength to pick it back up. They came to a stop. It felt strange to know that the only thing between them and the life tree was the mass of earth above them. The Oaks cleared the dirt with sweeping footsteps, earth falling away to reveal the willow's roots.

Work was slow. Lack of air set in, the pounding in his head growing louder with every breath. Keisin nestled his Amber into the space where two roots diverged, then shored it up with dirt, securing it in place with shaking hands. The gash on his palm tainted the soil in scarlet. He had cut it open with a knife earlier, but it was nothing to complain about. Blood was necessary in the creation of Ambers. A small sacrifice. It was nothing compared to everything else he had given away, even if it had been stolen from him. Labored breathing was the only sound that filled the void.

"Stop! You're going to get us killed!"

"We're going to die if we stay! Move!" An Oak shoved his ally to the floor, then redirected his attention to the earth above. Before he could act, he was tackled to the ground.

"You idiot! There's soldiers up there, you think they're going to let us live? Don't mess up the plan!"

There wasn't time- there wasn't time to go back- his sight began to blur. They wouldn't be far enough before it happened. Being in close proximity to the Ambers when they were broken would be a death sentence.

"I said move!"

Keisin couldn't see what was going on. Couldn't think. It never crossed his mind that this might not work. Or that he might die here. That this would be the end.

A cloud of dust swept over the group as moonlight brushed his cheek once more. A hole in the earth above them had been broken open, night air flooding into grateful lungs.

"Come on!" someone yelled. Death by fire or death by lightning- or certain death down here. Keisin followed the others as they scrambled to the space beneath the hole. The ground beneath them surged upwards, launching them to the surface. He was able to make out the shapes of the others. They were all here, except...

"Stay where you are!" the soldiers clustered around them, "put down your weapons!"

Two Ashes had remained behind. The Ambers. They were going to do it.

"Don't resi-

*Boom! Crack!* The ground below him erupted, lifting him into the air then slamming him back down, knocking the air out of his lungs. A blinding flash of light and heat flooded his senses. His eyes saw only white. His ears rang. His mouth tasted smoke. It was impossible to move, body immobilized by pain that cut through bone, accompanied by the millions of splinters that dug into every exposed part of his body, burying themselves in raw flesh. He coughed up blood, the crimson liquid filling his mouth from where he had bitten his tongue.

The explosion had ripped the roots of the willow out of the ground. Creaking, snapping bark, it was falling- a slain giant, deadly, for the very weight of its death could crush you beneath its branches. Flames reflected off his purple eyes, wide with fear at what he had achieved. Run. He needed to run. But he would not turn his back, not again. They had taken away his magic. His family. And now they would all burn, just like that boy, just like him. They would perish in magnificent flames of gold and orange and red that shone like the sunset, an end more beautiful than they deserved. He had sacrificed too much to regret this. Keisin steeled himself against impending death.

This was brilliance. This was revenge.

He closed his eyes and let the darkness take him.