2390 Ye Mighty  
  
The Axis Tree was so vast that it could only be perceived as a place, not as a thing. After all, it towered higher than the great peaks of Ariel's Game, which were already taller than any mountain on Earth - the branch Sunny and Kai were standing on was numerous kilometers long and as wide as a field, the ridges of the bark covering it more than spacious enough for two people to walk on.  
  
A complicated tangle of similarly enormous branches extended far down and high up, creating a dizzying three-dimensional labyrinth. A whole nation could have made their home on the branches of this great tree. Today, however, Sunny and Kai were the only people populating its desolate immensity.  
  
The sun had just disappeared beyond the horizon, and although the sea of clouds still glowed with the last vestiges of a dreamlike crimson sheen, the night was already enveloping the world with a veil of velvet darkness.  
  
The world was still, but it was not silent. Instead, it was permeated by the soothing murmur of flowing water.  
  
The Axis Tree had been covered in snow just a few seconds ago. Now, the snow was melting, torrents of cold water cascading down the vast maze of titanic branches in a series of clear waterfalls. Sunny had expected ash and lava to replace it, but to his surprise, nothing of the sort happened.  
  
Instead, the great tree was simply stripped of its white mantle and left bare, its naked branches swaying gently in the wind. There were no leaves, no fruit, no sign of vitality to their vast expanse. In fact, countless of the branches were broken, while many more seemed frail and diseased.  
  
It was as if the Axis Tree… was truly and utterly dead.  
  
Sunny looked around cautiously.  
  
"What do you think this place does?"  
  
There were five special squares on the game board - the Castles, the Shrines, and the Axis Tree. Sunny had mostly figured out the purpose of the first four, but he still had no idea what the function of the central square was.  
  
Kai was looking around, as well. "I don't see any structures. And I don't feel anything special, either."  
  
Sunny contemplated for a while. There had to be some use for the central square, apart from how important it was for traversing the board. The player occupying the middle would definitely have an advantage, but that advantage alone was not enough to make the square special.  
  
Granted, there had only been four runes carved on the sides of the jade board - ash, snow, fear,%2  
  
Still…  
  
"Let's explore a little."  
  
Kai hesitated for a moment, then cleared his throat.  
  
"Actually, before that," he pointed to the streams of clear water falling from high above. "Wouldn't it be a shame to just waste all this water?"  
  
Sunny stared at him in confusion, then scoffed.  
  
"Sure, go ahead."  
  
Soon enough, refreshed and clean for the first time in a long while, the two of them ventured to explore the labyrinth of branches. Kai was in a noticeably greater mood, even humming a jovial tune quietly, while Sunny found himself feeling like a person once more.  
  
It was a nice feeling.  
  
They wandered the Axis Tree for a while, jumping to lower branches or flying up to those that were higher. However, there was nothing special on any of them, and as Sunny and Kai drew closer to the trunk, it seemed less and less probable that they would find something special.  
  
In the end, they ascended to the top of the tree and looked north, witnessing the next mountain over. Sunny had hoped that they would be able to see further than usual, considering the height of the tree, but he was left disappointed. Everything beyond the neighboring mountains was hidden by а haze, and even Kai could not see through it.  
  
The three mountains in the north, however, glanced a little odd. Sunny was not sure what exactly was peculiar about them, but they definitely glanced subtly different from all the snowy peaks they had witnessed in the south.  
  
He sighed.  
  
"No luck here, I guess."  
  
He remained silent for a bit, then glanced at Kai.  
  
"Possibly we should check the spot where the Tree Devil was staying."  
  
Kai was the only one who had seen the Cursed Devil resting on a branch of the Axis Tree, so only he knew where that place was located.  
  
He led the way. They descended along the immense width of the tree's trunk, eventually reaching one of the lower branches - the rest of them, if there were any, disappeared into the mist of the sea of clouds.  
  
This particular branch was incredibly wide, especially at its base, where it connected to the trunk. That was where the Tree Devil had been sitting on the day they first saw it, surrounded by snow.  
  
There was no snow covering the tree now, so Sunny and Kai immediately saw the anomaly. Here, not far away from the Cursed Devil's resting place, the surface of the Axis Tree's trunk was viciously broken, a dark portal opening into its eerie depths. Nothing but mist dwelled beyond the portal, and out of it, a river of something seemed to have flowed once, solidifying into an amber mass.  
  
From a distance, it seemed as if a river of molten gold had escaped the gargantuan trunk, most of it spilling into the clouds, while a little bit remained on the branch in small frozen puddles.  
  
Sunny approached the nearest chunk of amber substance and touched it tentatively. It was smooth, hard, and cool to the touch.  
  
Kai asked from behind him: "What is it?"  
  
Sunny hesitated for a moment. Eventually, he answered in an incredulous tone: "It's… it's literally amber. It's tree sap."  
  
Standing up, he glanced at the breach in the trunk of the Axis Tree and frowned.  
  
Eventually, Sunny glanced at Kai. "I… I think it's dead."  
  
The breach was a wound dealt to the great tree a long time ago, and the pieces of golden amber were its blood.  
  
He took a deep breath.  
  
"Rather, I think it was killed."  
  
The breach in the trunk of the tree was enormous, but it was insignificant compared to its titanic size. Such a small wound would not have killed the Axis Tree unless it was simply an opening someone used to suck its amber ichor dry.  
  
Maybe the Tree Devil had not spent these thousands of years simply waiting for an adversary to show up. Maybe it had drained the young sapling of the World Tree of its boundless lifeforce and vitality, devouring it hungrily to nurture his own corrupted soul.  
  
If so…  
  
Then possibly whatever it was that the Axis Tree was supposed to grant the Domain controlling it was long gone, that function of the Game destroyed when the great tree died.  
  
Ariel's Game… was broken.  
  
Sunny looked at the pieces of golden amber with a distant expression.  
  
It was a little bit sad, and a little bit encouraging, to know that even things created by the great and horrible Ariel, the Demon of Dread, were not eternal.  
  
The Nightmare Spell had been created by a daemon as well, after all.  
  
So, maybe one day they would be able to kill it, too.  
  
A pale smile touched his lips.  
  
When Nephis first proclaimed her intention to destroy the Spell, it sounded like pure delusion.  
  
But it did not seem that way anymore.  
  
Looking at the deadly wound dealt to the Axis Tree, Sunny suddenly felt for the first time that their goal was within reach.