

SPELL STARTER

ELSIE CHAPMAN

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FOURTEEN

My fingers are about to grab a starter when all around us the bamboo begins to fall.

A terrible cracking sound fills the air as giant green stalks collapse one by one. They smash into one another, wood and fiber shredding apart. The thuds they make as they hit the ground travel up into my legs—I feel the force of their landing in my back teeth. Stumps left jutting out of the earth are raw and jagged, the hollowness inside gaping mouths.

I swear out loud and start dodging, trying to think of a plan. It's the first fight of a first tournament with a power-hungry gang leader in charge—of course Saint Willow's going to be putting on a show. Everything is going to make an impact. She won't appear, but her presence will still be felt, with no escaping it.

More crashing of bamboo. The wind cracks and shrieks. From above, spectators are cheering and clapping. Nothing but commotion all around.

Someone shouts to run. As the ground shakes, there's the scattered flurry of feet. Fighters are taking off in all directions, climbing over fallen stalks and heading deeper into the maze.

Fear traces my spine at the idea of going in there. The thick walls of bamboo that can topple at a whim. The winding paths that only lead you farther in. Until you're trapped.

The yell comes from somewhere behind me.

I spin around and see the bamboo falling from overhead first. A split second later, I see the fighter who yelled, his cheek turned away so I don't know his ring name.

He casts on the stalk headed directly toward him. And me.

His finger running along his palm. The glimpse of a gold starter winking in the sun.

The falling bamboo splits apart in midair, as though invisible lightning has struck it.

Hunks of broken bamboo as heavy as concrete fly in all directions.

I duck my head as the pieces hit the ground, leaving small dents. The earth opens up around the marks, and fresh stalks of bamboo begin to grow from the gaps. Bamboo stretches toward the sky with a thin screeching sound that hurts. Then these stalks begin to sway, too, held upright by the Founders until it's time for them to collapse.

A cold pit opens up inside my stomach.

How am I supposed to fight other casters while also defending myself from this ring built to attack? Pav mentioned me being a champion, so now everyone knows—no doubt there's a huge target on me. And to fight without using shield spells at all? With this magic that doesn't belong to me? A grim hopelessness looms.

I scramble away like a hunted animal and drop to a crouch behind a mass of broken bamboo. My breathing is jagged. I peek out and see fighters running everywhere, trying to stay ahead of a forest cast to keep coming down on top of them. There's yelling and screaming, the sounds of pain and fighting a constant roar in the air.

On cheeks, I see flashes of numbers—no longer zeroes but ones, twos, fours, magic keeping a tally and continuously rewriting them as casters are eliminated.

My zero is unchanged.

I turn and catch sight of a fighter staring at me. Her eyes are huge even from here, her expression stunned. Like she can't believe who she has to fight. Her ring name is Misha, white letters still easy to read.

A blur of silver slips from her hand—she's just cast. But before I can react, Misha's the one flying backward.

She's just tried a shield spell.

The Founders aren't just canceling our shield spells—they're punishing us for them.

Misha lands hard on top of half-broken bamboo and screams in pain.

I drag my gaze away. I'm still crouched over, looking for a way out. Only my reputation saved me. Misha could have planned an attack instead, but she froze when she saw who I was and could think only of protection. Could think only of a shield, the Founders' warning forgotten.

My eyes scan the maze as I try to decide.

The forest in there is darker, so much denser. There are places to hide inside, maybe, nonmagic ways to work around having no shield spells. A two-second sprint, and I can buy myself some time before having to start casting with this magic.

But all those paths. Going in circles until you're lost deep in the maze. Where those thousands of disoriented warriors all died.

Bamboo whistles and thuds onto the forest floor just behind me.

I gasp, then slide down another inch. I look over the line of broken bamboo in front of me with eyes that feel wild. My pulse rockets. My mind screams for me to run.

Hide in the maze, Aza. Wait this out. No one gets hurt if you do nothing.

Except I know I can't do that. I know I have to cast. Saint Willow's made clear that if she's not happy, I won't be, either. And while casting with this new magic might go completely wrong, I'm also out of choices.

It's my best chance—my only chance.

I move ahead, eyes still wild, looking out for fighters, for the danger of collapsing bamboo—

The blow lands on my back and pushes downward, like a giant's footstep. It presses harder and harder, the ground grinding away so I'm sinking. More, deeper. I can't breathe, can't move. The world is nothing but dirt and lack of air.

A skin spell, cast on my entire body. To make me stay down.

This is it. I'm out. Everything's going gray. Any second, the Founders are going to change me into marble, keeping my body safe until the end of the fight. I struggle to focus on the distant sounds of cheers and applause from the spectators, the blurred motion of other fighters around me casting on one another.

Your own fault. You waited, and someone got to you first. Now you're going to have to answer to Saint Willow.

A thunderous crack comes, and the foot lifts. Air comes in gusts, filling up my lungs.

I turn over, breathing hard.

The fighter is still stuck beneath the bamboo that knocked him

over. Not one of the bigger stalks—he’s still conscious, still in the game—but big enough to end his skin spell on me. He can’t hide how he’s favoring one side as he squirms free. A broken rib.

I see his ring name on one cheek—Riv—and the number one on the other.

Cast. Do it. Or he will.

Stumbling to my feet, I draw a six-pointed star on my palm with jagged motions. I tear a white coin from the metal holder at my side, gripping it tight.

I cast.

The forest floor trembles again, this time from the strange magic inside me. I will it to pull more from the earth, magic that is shapeless and without form but that I see as a red cloud in my mind. It seeks me, and I let it.

Beneath my shoes, the forest floor is hot, and the heat burns upward, filling my veins from the inside. Fire in my arms, in my hands, my palm with its waiting spell.

For Riv, a bone one.

Another rib can go.

But instead of curling over with pain, he slowly stands straighter. His hand goes to his side, pressing on his broken rib, and a strange expression fills his face. Shock, but no pain. He meets my eyes, and when I see the laughter building in his, I’m the one who is shocked.

My bone spell *fixed* his rib instead of breaking a new one.

I *helped* another fighter.

The magic in my veins, the one I can’t control—my biggest enemy in this whole forest.

My hands shake, and the used-up starter drops to the ground. I'm taking a step back even as Riv takes one forward. He's reaching for a fresh starter when casting pain comes at me.

It should be almost nothing, an ebb of an ache that comes and goes and is barely remembered. Because I only drew six points. Because the Founders have promised protective magic.

But this magic is turning on me yet again. While everyone else might be okay.

The pain bowls me over.

The world reduces to a core of agony. It lives in me, then stretches outward. Bits and pieces of the ring swim through—shades of green, hot dry sun, the sweet scent of blood.

I fall, vision going gray, everything twisted.