

REBEL ANTS

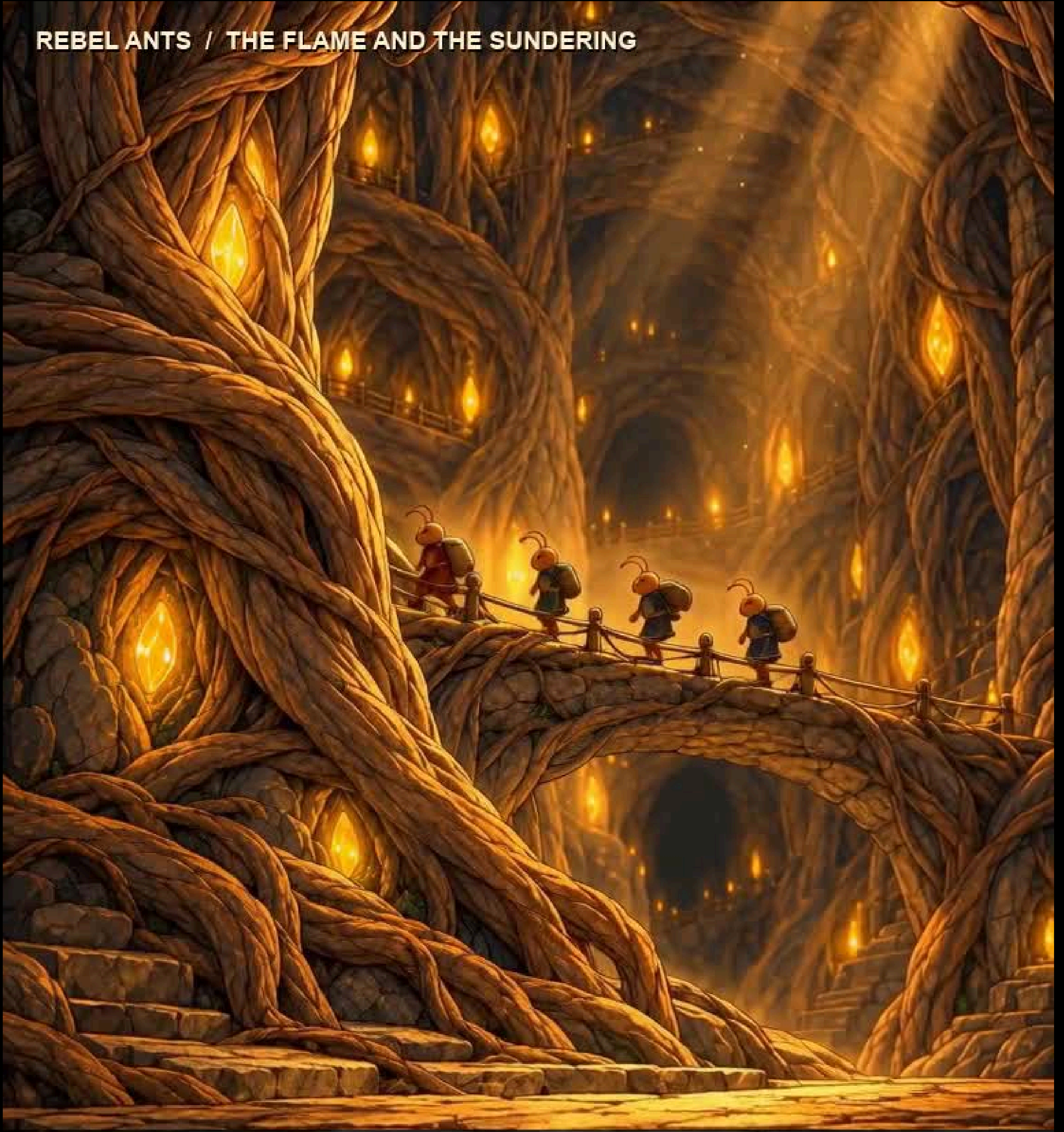
THE WARNING

VOLUME 1



MIGUEL CONCEPCION

REBEL ANTS / THE FLAME AND THE SUNDERING



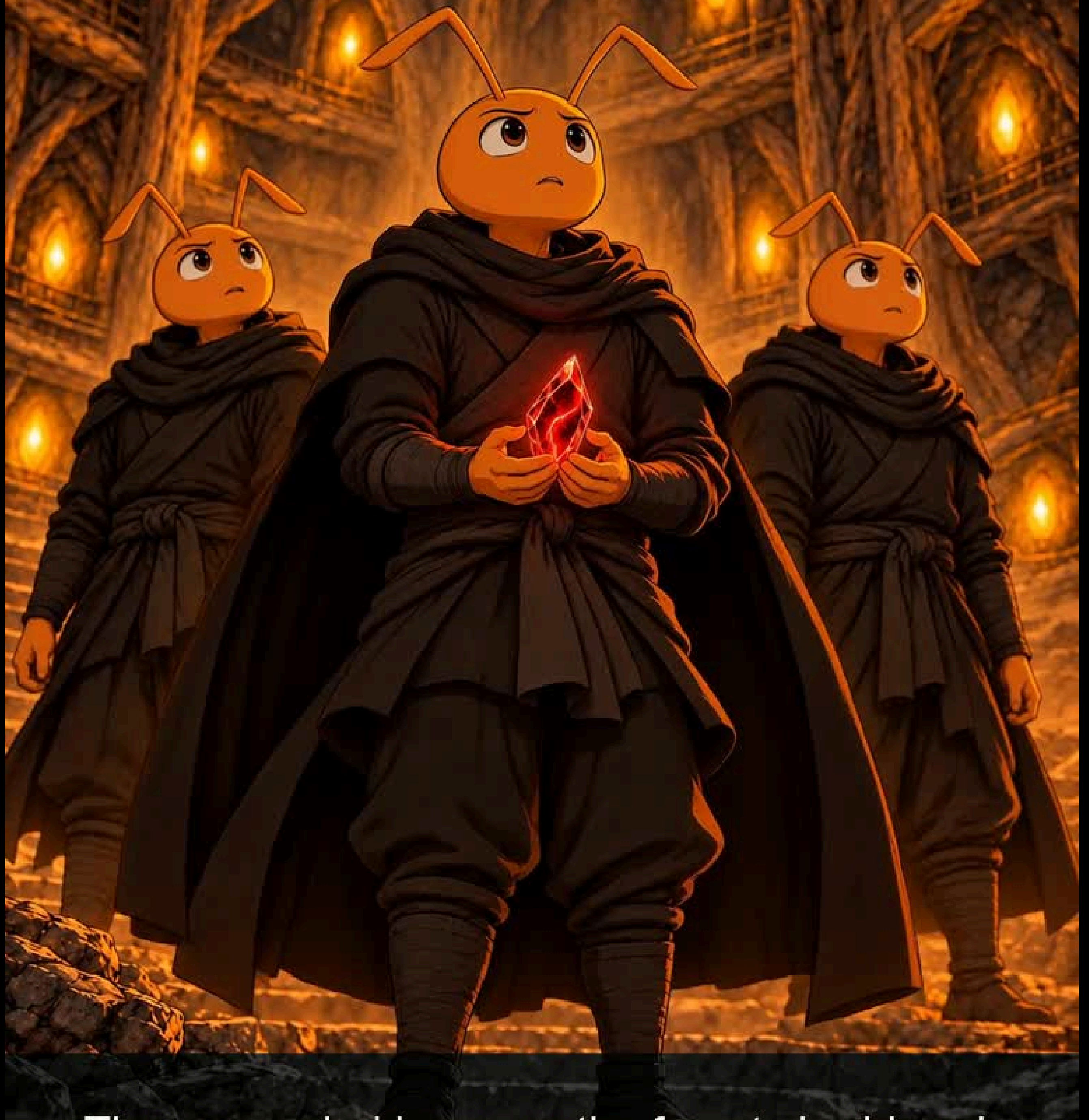
The old ants said the roots remember everything.

REBEL ANTS / THE CRIMSON SHARD AND THE WAR



The ants staggered in the light.

REBEL ANTS / THE EXILE AND THE HEARTBEAT



The war ended because the forest shuddered.



Riko woke to the feeling of the tunnel breathing. A soft rise and fall under his back, a distant rumbling like someone whispering through a miles-long pipe. For a moment he lay still on his hammock of woven root-fibers and listened.



The Ashigaru tunnels were supposed to be quiet at this hour. Nightshift builders coming in, day-shift scouts not yet out. A few murmured conversations. The occasional clink of tools.



Not this. The rumble faded, but the hairs along his antennae stayed standing.



He swung his legs over the side, feet hitting the packed earth floor. It felt normal, solid, cool, familiar. Still, he pressed one palm against it, spreading his fingers wide. “Don’t start talking to the floor again,” a voice mumbled from the next hammock over. “Last time you did that, you nearly got assigned to the Sohei.”



Riko snorted. “They’d throw me off the cliff within a day. I ask too many questions.” From the dim next hammock, Taro — all shell and no patience — rolled over and flicked a pebble at him. “The roots shift. They always shift. That’s why we reinforce them,” Taro said. “We’re Ashigaru. We fix. We carry. We don’t... brood.” Riko waited a beat. The rumble didn’t return. Maybe it was nothing. A dream shaped by Master Hanto’s warnings, by the whispers in the taverns, by the way every old ant had started their stories lately with “Back before the ground started acting strange...”



He pulled on his armor in sections. Green plates, worn but well-fitted. Straps cinched with practiced hands. At his wrist, the red thread sat where it always did, knotted twice, the ends frayed from years of work and sweat.



He touched it lightly, a habit he pretended not to have. “Morning,” he murmured, to no one in particular. The tunnel outside the barracks opened into one of the main arteries of the Ashigaru colony—a broad, sloping passage carved smooth by generations of feet and tool-marks. Glowing seed-lights were embedded into the walls, pulsing gently with the heartbeat of the roots.



As he walked, he passed familiar sights. A pair of elderly Ashigaru teaching younglings how to pack dirt properly around a support root. A trio of haul teams rolling a cluster of crystal orbs down toward the lower storerooms, grunting in rhythm.



A mural carved into the wall showing Ashigaru from decades past standing around a fallen tree aboveground, their eyes wide at the endless sky. Riko had always liked that one. He slowed for just a moment, looking at the expressions on their carved faces. Awe, fear, joy, all mixed together. “I bet the sky’s quieter than this,” he said. “You’d lose that bet,” a familiar voice answered behind him. “The wind up there howls. Like the Forge on a bad day.” Riko turned.



Kaiden stood leaning against the far wall, red armor polished even in the dim root-light, helmet tucked under one arm. He looked like he'd stepped out of a Samurai mural by mistake. "You're in Ashigaru territory awfully early," Riko said. "Lose a duel and get demoted to hauling dirt?" Kaiden smirked. "Not yet. My captain wants fresh eyes on the outer reinforcement teams. Apparently some Ashigaru scout reported 'the tunnel breathing.'"



Riko felt the tips of his antennae heat. "Must be one of the weird ones," he said. "Talks to floors." "Sounds unstable," Kaiden replied. "I'll keep my distance." They fell into step side by side, heading down the artery toward the outer tunnels. For a while, neither spoke. The silence between them was easy, worn in over years of shared meals, shared near-mistakes, shared jokes told in places where jokes weren't welcome.



At a bend in the passage, where the ceiling dipped low and the light dimmed, Kaiden's hand flicked out, quick as a blade, catching Riko's wrist. The red thread glowed faintly between his fingers in the seed-light. "You still wear it," Kaiden said. Riko pulled his arm back, a little too fast. "Of course I do," he said. "I haven't forgotten him."