

Act 2

As desperately as we needed to bring Angel to medical care, taking her directly to one of the doctors of Nigerdamt would prove its own death sentence. We were of the opinion that the Dynast would probably be a little testy after everything that had transpired and would know that we were looking for aid. Nibeldamt was a big place, but there were only so many places we could hide from him. Instead we took advantage of the fact that Ragara's mansion was on the outskirts of town. We made for the mountains, and found a small cave. It was littered with old spoor of wolf and bear, but showed no occupancy for a while. There I laid Angel down, and made her as comfortable as possible. Clockwork Dog set to work on her bandages, while I examined my hand.

It was all fucked up. I couldn't even feel most of it any more, something I was quite grateful for. My fingers were turning odd colors and warped unnaturally. Nothing responded to my commands. I shrugged. The hand would simply be the first of the prices I was willing to pay. Angel wasn't one of those prices though.

After she was attended to, Dog and I stepped outside and spread out, looking for running water. The cave bore signs that at some point it had been a stream head. The water course should be somewhere nearby. In time we found it and contrived methods of carrying water back from the broad leaves of great trees.

There was a man-shaped thing standing outside the cave. It was the height of a bear and as furry, but its legs and body were not ursine in shape. Naked if such a term could be applied to something with such a coat of hair, the creature rested on hand on the roof of the cave mouth and stared within. Tufted ears perked up as we approached, and the squat head turned to face us. It had a snout like a bear below a high forehead. The dark brown fur was lighter across its face, highlighted with gold and burgundy. I was drawn to the eyes. They were pure gold, but blazing hot like the metal still within a furnace. It had no pupils or irises. Dog and I paused.

“Mortals, have you come to my abode to offer me a sacrifice?” it asked. The voice was deep, fitting that it should come from the mountainous body. Its lungs must have been cavernous and provided a voice that was filled with age and the old powers.

“If you try to take her, I will wreak such a horror upon you that death will seem a mercy when I am finished. And if you survive and I die, I will curse you with my dying breath and haunt you till the end of times, bending the efforts of mortal men to wreck your home and destroy anything that you care about,” Clockwork Dog replied.

I looked at him astonished. “Good man!” I exclaimed. “I think you're getting the rhythm of this.”

The shaggy primordial man looked at us bemused. “Mortals, do you have any idea who I am?”

“Don't know, don't care, should you mean to harm her.” Dog replied.

“And are you also filled with this lunacy?” it asked me.

Now if there's one thing I was filled with, lunacy would be a good name for it. “I'm not as creative as he is, but I'm a lot more spiteful,” I admitted. “Should you harm her, there is no limit to the horrors I

will eagerly seek out to visit upon you, until the gods come to plead with me to stop our revenge.”

“You stand in the presence of a god now!” it exclaimed. “I am Shogg, lord of these mountains. You would do well to make obeisance if you don't want to start a conflict with one beyond you.”

“Listen Shogg, we just picked a fight with a Dynast, lost, and as soon as we can we're going to go do it again. Picking fights with those who think they're beyond us is what we do,” I retorted.

“It's like our thing,” Dog agreed.

Shogg leaned forward, looming over us. I think he expected cowering, but we leaned forward right back out of stubborn belligerence. “Which Dynast?” the god asked.

Dog and I exchanged a look. His look asked me how far I wanted to go, and my look told him I thought there was a chance we had something in common with this forest god. I decided to take some risks. “Ragara Aino. We assaulted him in his house-”

“Which we later set afire,” Dog interjected.

“-broke his jaw-”

“-assaulted his servants-”

“-ruined his breakfast-”

“-and insulted his parentage,” Dog concluded.

“We did?” I paused, not remembering the last point.

“It was while you were still out. I woke up first, and told him his conception followed his father finding attention in the hairy embrace of an amorous goat. I didn't stay awake for long,” Dog filled me in.

“I knew I liked you for a reason,” I responded, impressed.

Shogg was taken aback quite literally, for he ceased to loom over us and stood erect. “You said all this to a Immaculate martial artist of the Blessed Isle? Did you not know he would bury such as you in a conflict?”

“Lord Shogg, this was after he buried us in a fight,” I responded.

“He hurt her,” Dog said with a gesture towards the silent repose of Fall of Angels. “We took that very seriously.”

“Immaculate Dragon or peon, noble or peasant, god or ant, we don't let that sort of thing slide,” I continued.

The forest god stared at us, aghast at our complete mockery of propriety. “Let's be honest,” I got the conversation back on the tangent I wanted. “If you have any loyalty to Ragara Aino, you may as well run back to your master and tell him where we are. He would take anything less as an insult, and

actually helping us would be tantamount to a personal attack.”

“Especially if you helped us recuperate, because after that we're going to personally attack him,” Dog clarified.

“Again,” I added.

“Only nastier.”

“Hopefully in a more humiliating fashion.”

“And maybe burn the other half of his house down.”

“Lord Shogg has no master!” Shogg interrupted us. “That upstart has no respect for the emissaries of Yu Shan, and only my better manners oblige me to aid him on the full moon. The rest of the time, he may look to his own way, as I shall look to the forest.” His twisted words hinted at the truth so blatantly I couldn't believe he wasn't simply admitting Ragar beat submission out of him.

“Please tell me, divine one, do manners dictate anything about healing mortals who attacked this disrespectful Dynast?” I asked.

“No,” Shogg replied slyly. “They never mention anything of the sort.” Of course, beating submission into someone rarely makes friends as well.

“Then step into our parlor, Lord Shogg of the Nibeldamt Mountains. Please lower yourself to accepting our meager mortal hospitality,” Dog beckoned him with a bow. “As soon as we are healed, we intend to wreak a terrible vengeance on the one who thinks himself your master. Perhaps our future plans might interest you?”

“With pleasure,” the god accepted, and joined us in the cave.

We flattered and fawned on him as best we could. We told him how honored we were that he deigned to speak with us, and Dog lapsed into such flowery praise that I was struck silent since my ability to lie was vastly inferior to his. Still, by the time Shogg, self-styled Lord of the Mountains, left, the bones in my hand were set, and healing, and Angel rested easily. Her bleeding had stopped, and no longer was her breathing labored. We'd sworn to eat only the products of the trees and bushes so long as we remained, but since I didn't really feel like hunting a wild bore the fair way, that was an easy oath to make. Of Ash Maiden, Shogg knew nothing, save that she had not died in his mountains. She came here from time to time, but he paid no more attention to her than any other mortal.

When our Angel awoke, we filled in any parts of the story she had been unconscious for. Dog was self-effacing about his role taunting our captor, but I told it with joy, implying a self-sacrificing aspect to it. That it had resulted in Dog being the first on the rack instead of either of us I attributed to his quick thinking, and noted that had also paved the way for him to talk us out of immediate peril. Angel was impressed. Dog of course denied that he had such noble goals, but he'd already established himself as a liar. Now he came across being humbly dishonest. After that I said nothing more on the subject, leaving the ideas I hoped I had planted in her mind to lay in fertile soil. Just because the love of my life was dead was no reason not to help my ally get his.

“There are a couple things we learned from Shogg,” I continued, when we had gotten to the present. “The first is that Ragara Aino is, or rather was, a martial artist trained in their egocentric cult of self-love. He left after learning the parts involving beating up his enemies, but before taking oaths that would interrupt his hedonism.”

“Like chastity or poverty?” Angel surmised. “He didn't look like the type to take well to either of those.”

“Exactly,” Dog agreed. “Unfortunately, that means he's learned some or all of the Immaculate Style of Fire, at least from what I could tell. Which means he's probably even more capable than he showed us, but for him to unleash his true power, he'd have killed us. Since he wanted us alive, he kept himself somewhat under control.”

“Oh, that's not good. He's more powerful than we saw?” she protested.

“Much more, most likely,” Dog assented. “In addition, he's married to a Pelep, who may be as powerful as he is. Shogg observed her during the spring thaw, escorting a cargo of steel down the river. From what I know of House Peleps, she probably manages the business side of things, arranging sales and transport times. While she may not be as dangerous as him in a fight, she should have most of their armed guards with her, which means when she returns they'll have a small army to chase us with.”

“Furthermore, we don't know what connection he, or they, have to Ash Maiden's murderer,” I continued. “Obviously they have some.”

“Ragara wouldn't have strangled her,” Angel concluded. “He has no need to. What about his bride? Do you know anything about her?”

“Not really. I'd never met Aino before now and doubt I'd know his wife either.”

I looked at him curiously. Angel mirrored my expression. By common agreement, we couldn't directly ask him how he would have met a Dynast, nor why he now referred to one with such familiarity. Much as we wanted him to explain, Clockwork Dog met our gazes levelly and volunteered nothing.

“Anyway, it means we have a limited amount of time to work before Ragara's personal army returns. The spring thaw was several months ago, and if she took the cargo to the meeting of the Meander and the Rock, she could already be on her way back,” Dog continued, changing topics of conversation with such tactlessness that we clearly understood his past was still off limits. With a sigh he admitted, “We're not much closer to finding out who killed Ash Maiden than when we began.”

“Not true,” I disagreed. “We know several things. First, Ragara Aino may not have done it himself, but he knows either who did or has suspicions. Secondly, we know he wanted us alive, and wanted information out of us. Finally, he was perfectly prepared to believe we were either Anathema or Terrestrials, and was surprised when we weren't. That tells me there's another faction at work in Nibeldamt, one Ragara Aino half expects to send powerful assassins after him, and one he's inclined to believe killed Ash Maiden.”

“The other foundries,” said Angel, suddenly coming to a logical conclusion after silently placing the intervening blocks. “Ragara controls one foundry, maybe more, and clearly makes a lot of money doing it. If someone else controls the other, they could be feuding and with this much money at stake, they

afford some very exotic assassins.”

“We should go and find out who controls them, and if they have the kind of money you think they do,” I decided. Then, in consideration for her injured state, I added, “You should eat something first.”

“You mean tonight?” Dog exclaimed.

“Of course. It's not much past noon now. We should be able to make it in time for the evening shift change. We'll be disguised by the masses.”

“Are you mad? We need time to recover,” Dog violently dissented, rising to his feet from his rocky seat and looked down at me. I could see his proverbial hackles rising.

“Dog, that Dynast heals faster than we do. He has an army on the way. Time is not on our side. Besides, right now he's devoting his efforts to rebuilding his house and ascertaining how much damage we did. This is the perfect time to do some exploration, especially since we're going to give his estates a wide berth.”

“Her leg is broken, as is your hand! Why do we have to go now?”

I flexed my fingers a few times. They ached when the tendons moved over the wounded bone. “I'll fight with my left,” I concluded. “Besides, we aren't looking for a fight. We just want information.”

“You just want to find a noble way to die!” Dog snapped. “And you'll take the both of us with you.”

That hurt.

“Listen to me, you sniveling maggot,” I snarled, suddenly furious as my sleep deprived rage blasted into overdrive. “I have done-”

“Boys, help,” interrupted Angel. With a groan she turned sideways on the wide stone she lay on, and got her feet under her. Both Dog and I paused, standing erect over her supine form. Her first attempt to stand didn't work, but then she grabbed a hold of the two of us and pulled herself upright. We instinctively cupped her arms as she did, and soon she stood between us. That forced us to draw away from each other and cleared the air. “Dog, we can't stay here. If Shogg the forest god is beholden to Ragara, he's probably running there right now to tell him where we are. Maybe he'll just tell everything to curry favor and maybe he's try to bargain with the knowledge, but our position here isn't safe. Also, we do need information, and Ending's logic is sound. But we both know he's hiding something, because he lies like I act on stage, a terrible thing to watch that fools no one.” She turned to face me, and asked, “So, tell us, what are you hiding? Why do we have to go now?”

I stared at the two of them. “It doesn't matter,” I explained. “It's just a personal thing.”

“This whole thing is a personal thing,” Angel countered.

“Don't worry about it,” I said again, and turned my back on them to look at the stars that speckled the sky through the tree branches.

Dog impressed me then. I hadn't known his self control was so great. “Ending, I apologize. You would

not throw away our lives.” That must have been hard to say, and recognition of that struck me deeper than his initial accusation. Because I didn't know if he was right, and it frightened me that I might very well do what he trusted me not to.

“Forgiven,” I replied. “I'm sorry as well.” I turned to face him, and made a slight head bow to acknowledge he'd taken the higher ground by laying aside his pride first.

“Good. Now kiss and make up,” ordered Angel.

“No,” we said in unison.

“Damn. That would have been some entertainment,” she opined.

“Can we go now?” I asked. “We do need to leave soon if we want to make the shift change.”

“You still haven't told us what's so important about leaving now,” Angel observed.

“Would you please drop it?” I asked again. “You know my logic, and you said yourself my reasoning is sound. Please leave my issues alone.”

“Very well,” Angel replied. Dog made noises to the contrary, but Angel jabbed him in the ribs with one of her sharp little elbows, and he stopped making any sound but painful grunts. “Let's be honest. We are on a half mad vengeance crusade, so I can't get too upset about a little personal mania. But you lose all privileges to criticize others for acting crazy until you talk to us,” she judged. “You also take a burden of proof on yourself when proposing our course of action, because we can reasonably wonder if you're being influenced by whatever it is you won't talk about.”

“Fine,” I relented.

“Good. Now, Dog, what do you think we should do?” she asked.

“Go to Nibeldamt and find out who owns the other foundries. While we're there, we can make sure no harm has come to Anvil or his family from our actions,” he concluded.

The other two of us agreed. We ate what we could and drank from the stream. Angel tested herself and discovered she could walk slowly and her funeral robes concealed her limp. The robes themselves were no longer a pure white, but had been tainted by soot and ash to a dismal gray. It was fitting.

Shortly after nightfall, we crept into town, and patrolled the city streets. There were seven foundries, of which three were brightly emblazoned with the heraldic arms of House Ragara. Also emblazoned with such were counting houses, farmers markets and butcher shops, several temples, and the largest pier into the river. Along the way we watched Anvil's house just long enough to be sure that he still lived there, and seemed in good health. Reassured that no harm had come to him through our efforts, we continued our investigation.

Of the other four foundries, all carried the colors of brilliant crimson peaks on a field of green. The same symbol was repeated on great lumberyards to the south, and the city's formal garrison. Rows of houses and shops bore the crimson and green, or stylized iron-wrought portrayals of it. Clockwork Dog glanced at it and concluded 'Gens Maheka' in a confident tone. On the southern end of the city stood a

large estate, less ostentatious than that of the Dynast, but more defensible. Above it blew the crimson and green over ornate walls that remained fully functional. Carvings and bass reliefs did not begin until well up the outer wall, and several guards marched rounds at regular intervals. Four men in simpler but no less effective armor stood before a vast steel portcullis at attention. Though the gate was closed for the evening, they showed no signs of slacking in their duty.

“Let's break in,” I decided from the safety of a nearby temple belfry we'd taken refuge in.

“That didn't work so well last time,” Dog pointed out.

“We're more prepared now,” I countered.

“You and I are still injured, and they'll be alert after what we did to Ragara,” Angel replied.

“What if we set fire to it first?”

“No,” they said in unison.

“Damn.”

I looked into their eyes as I had not done since the funeral nearly a month ago. I had a tendency to see people as my memories of them, and not as they truly were. Now I saw that Clockwork Dog was tired, but exhaustion and recovery had worn aside some of the softer aspects of his personality. He was more protective of Angel than he had been before, as he came to understand that as powerful and capable as she was, she was not immortal. But there were no traces of doubt in his eyes. He was dedicated to the cause as he had not been before. Angel was different. For the first time, the knowledge that she could be beaten and easily had come upon her. It frightened her a little. But that had tempered her brashness as she had promised she would temper my mania. Some overconfidence had been stripped from her like the weakness in Dog. Still, she betrayed no awareness of his feelings, nor any inkling of returning them.

As for me, when I took a moment of introspection, I found only whirling thoughts filed with chaos. My dreams had not been kind recently, and now I feared sleep like it was a savage beast that hunted me. After a moment, I realized that when I looked into my own heart I grew frightened of what I found, and I ceased to look inwards. Instead I directed my efforts towards the house that bore the Gens Maheka crest. My thoughts lashed at it like a chaotic sandstorm, seeking a weakness in the problem.

“If we can't attack them, and we cannot sneak in, then we must meet with them evenly. But how can we impel them to meet with us?” I asked.

“Go knock on the front gate,” suggested Dog with a shrug.

“And offer them what?” I asked.

“Offer to burn Ragara's mansion down,” Angel offered, seeking a laugh. Neither of us obliged, because we were staring at her very seriously.

“We could,” I noted carefully, trying to direct my scattered and sleep deprived thoughts at the problem. “Surely our work is known now.”

“What do you want to do?” scoffed Angel. “Walk up to the front gate and pound on it, asking for an audience with the lord of the manor to discuss some freelance arson?”

Which is exactly what I did not half an hour later. The guards stared at me like I was a madman, but I ignored them until an impeccably dressed attache came to see what I wanted.

“To see the master of the house,” I replied.

“I see,” he murmured, casting a disparaging glance at me. “Are you in mourning for something? Is this about the funeral, because this isn't the way to ask for a funeral plot, something we are willing to provide through other avenues,” he suggested in a clear attempt to make me go away.

“It isn't about a funeral plot,” I replied calmly. “My dearly beloved is already buried. I'm here about Ragara Aino.”

“That would be Prince Ragara to you,” he corrected me absently, with the air of a man discussing international economics with a village idiot. “I'll speak to my master's secretary. And your name is?”

“Fluffy Bunny,” I replied in a tone completely devoid of humor.

“You can go now,” he replied instantly.

“Why don't you go tell your master I'm waiting for him?”

“Because you're either an imbecile or a moron, and he doesn't have time for either.”

“We shall see,” I replied. Then I strolled off the manor grounds and took a seat on a low pile of boulders by a partially built house. The attache wandered off, no doubt to laugh about my appearance with the other underlings and never mention it to anyone of import. In time, my companions joined me that we might quickly discourse on our next move.

“Didn't go so well,” Dog surmised.

“He won't even take a message to the master of the house,” I said of the attache. “We need another plan to get in.”

“Without involving any constructive arson,” Dog prefixed his question. “Do you have a suggestion for getting in there before the minions of our favorite Dynast come howling for our heads?”

“You're presenting me with an unfair limitation,” I complained.

“That would be a 'no,’” Angel translated for him.

“Should you be thinking right now?” I asked. “Deciphering clues or something?”

“There's nothing to decipher,” he replied. “We've established that the Maheka spies in the house of Ragara are either known or suspected. Ragara's spies in the Maheka house are unknown but assumed. Ragara possesses more personal power than these guys do, but lacks the support they have since

Lookshy stands directly between him and his power base.” Dog shrugged. “Since half the Dynast's power is absent, escorting his annual shipment downriver, the masters of house Maheka probably aren't even here, being out securing positional advantages. That's the only way they can counter Ragara's wife, a Water aspect, arriving at the markets first and therefore commanding a better price.”

I looked at Angel. “Don't you love how we established all that so quickly?” I asked blandly.

“I certainly feel quite productive,” she agreed.

Dog sighed. “Ragara wanted information out of us, but attempted to extract it in the bowels of his estate with only two servants. Clearly, he suspected someone in his own men. But since we haven't been immediately let into house Maheka, either his precautions worked, or information from the Mahekan spies hasn't disseminated through the estate. Since we know they couldn't have been too successful given how subtle we weren't, therefore the Mahekan factor must be keeping a tight grip on how much he knows. He'd only play his cards so close to his own chest if he was paranoid, implying that Ragara has infiltrated his house as well, but more covertly. Since the dynasts of the realm are better at these games than the houses of the Seventh Legion, this makes sense. Still, Gens Maheka is a thousand miles closer than the Blessed Isle, which is why they have more soldiers than Ragara, who nearly depleted his personal guard to provide a proper escort for their cargo. His wife, a Pelep, is also escorting the barge through the floods of the first seasonal thaw, doubly implying she's a Water aspect. Whoever gets their cargo to market first gets the best price. That, combined with the immensity of the undertaking for Ragara, means he can only do this once a year. Hence the cargo is the entirety of their annual product, sold all at once for the best profit, but with the most risk. Again, why he sent the lion's share of his guard with it. Gens Maheka has to know this, but can't do anything about it because they probably don't have a Water aspect here. Still, they seem to be evenly balanced in the city, so they have to capitalize on Ragara's weakness somehow. A personal conflict is right out, but they could be sabotaging his supplies, hence why the coke was dirty, and securing more advantageous contracts. That's why more local merchants fly their colors, and more temples. Maheka has always been more religious than the Realm, especially Houses Ragara or Peleps, who are basically noble pirates.” Dog thought for a few heartbeats, going over what he just explained to us in his head. “Not that complicated, really. Nothing implies who killed Ash Maiden, mind you.”

I stared at Dog in silence, too nonplussed to speak. He did that to me from time to time. Angel was nodding as she followed along, finding his logical bridges solid in construction. Dog wasn't really paying attention to either of us, being more concerned with finding a comfortable seat on his rock.

“How does that help us get inside?” I asked.

“It doesn't, really. Not unless you can find one of Maheka's spies and show him your face. Then he would probably go running to his boss with stories about you, and you'd get an audience in no time. The attache would also probably get fired, which is exactly the kind of petty revenge that suits one such as him.”

“Dog, why must we always drag these things out of you?” asked Angel rhetorically. “Any ideas where we could find one of Maheka's agents?”

“Sure. Find whoever sells Maheka his coke. I'll bet rocks to riding horses that there's an agent of Maheka's there.”

Angel and I exchanged glances, then considered the barred gate. "Is there anything more aggravating than a brilliant moron?" I asked her.

"Nothing springs to mind," she agreed demurely.

"Why am I a moron?" demanded Dog.

"You aren't. That's what's so aggravating," Angel informed him. "Let's go find out who sells Ragara his coke, shall we?"

That wasn't too hard. We looked around until we found a squat building in front of a fenced in yard piled high with coke. Neither House Ragara or Gens Maheka's colors flew above it, implying the owners plied their goods to anyone. Attached to the yard was a low pier that intruded into the river, about the right height to accept barges from upstream. The river Meander was sluggish here, and moved with little purpose as befitted its name. Dimly glimmering lights shone in the windows, and we let ourselves in the unlocked front door.

Inside was a small room with desks for three men, only one of which was occupied. A thin, white haired man of wasp-like features and bony hands was adding figures on a slate. Two large men who might have had "goon," "thug," or "bodyguard" written across their faces depending on the legality of their employ stood in the corner, comparing club size. The one on the left had a much bigger club, which the one on the right noted with bludgeon envy. All three looked up when we entered, and the scribe at the desk pushed back his chair so he could face us easier.

"Good evening," he welcomed us with professional courtesy. "How can I help you?"

I looked at Dog. Angel looked at Dog. Dog looked at me. I glanced from him to the secretary and back to him. "He's talking to you," I supplied helpfully.

"Oh, right. Good evening," watching realization dawn on Clockwork Dog's face was like the gears he was named for coming to alignment. "I'm the representative of a small operation upriver, where we've struck an amazingly vital vein of anthracite coal. We'd been digging for gold, you understand, but are not in the habit of ignoring the bounty of the earth."

"Yes, the Earth Dragon will award great wonders on those who deserve it," the scribe agreed in a tone to correct Dog of improperly allocating gratitude.

"Of course. We who follow Pesiap's example by working in the Earth always have always been grateful for his generosity. Still, we have quite a bit of good, fine anthracite and no market for it, being as it is that it isn't what we were originally looking for. We were wondering if that was something you would like to discuss?"

"Of course," the scribe assented. "I'm always interested in discussing matters of business with one who holds closely to the great truths of the Immaculate Faith. So few of these locals have elevated themselves from their crude animism even in the light of our evangelism."

Mentally I braced myself. I was exhausted and low on patience, and this was going to require more than had on hand. Angel had already gone to the two goons. Proudly, the one on the left showed her his club.

“The question is, do you know how to use that?” she asked sweetly.

“I am Serenading Thrush,” the scribe introduced himself to Dog. He didn't look like he'd ever serenaded anything. “Please, have a seat.”

Clockwork Dog did so, pulling a chair away from one of the other desks. “My backers are not aware that I'm here right now, and I'd like to keep it that way,” he began. “So with your permission, I'd like to refrain from using my real name. They can be so intrusive some times.”

“I understand,” the wizened scribe agreed. “What shall I call you then?”

“Fuzzy Puppy,” Dog replied after a pause like he was searching for a pseudonym. “This is my scribe, Fluffy Bunny, who will take notes during our discussion,” he continued, indicating me. “Could you extend to him supplies for the evening?” Our host indicated them on the desk with a grandiose wave.

I stared at Dog, trying to murder him with my smile. I could write about twenty words, one them being my name, and the rest being the names of my close friends. Instead I sat at his right hand and readied a piece of parchment and a quill pen.

“You understand that our discussion is, of course, non-binding to my employers?” Serenading Thrush confirmed.

“Do you think I shall sign a contract under the name 'Fuzzy Puppy?’” asked Dog amused. “What Magistrate shall I take it to for enforcement?”

“Indeed,” replied the other.

They then began some rather intense bargaining, made all the more impressive that Dog had no product with which to sell. I made cryptic marks on parchment and pretended they were a personal shorthand. Angel flirted with the guards, admired their clubs, and demonstrated how she liked to polish them. She seemed intent on a long, slow stroking club-polishing motion. After the long demonstration, the one with the shorter club began to flush and had to leave. The other kept asking questions and tried to arrange a period of personal instruction on the topic. I kept hoping lightning would pierce the roof and kill me, that I wouldn't have to hear either discussion. No such luck was forthcoming.

Some time later, we left. Dog walked purposely down a darkened road away from the yard while hissing under his breath, “Are we being followed?”

“What?” hissed back Angel.

“Are we being followed?” he hissed louder.

“Borrowed?” she asked.

“You're as beautiful as a marble goddess with hearing to match,” muttered Dog. “Ending?”

“Not that I can tell,” I replied. The remaining goon hadn't left the building and doubted the scribe had the vitality to flit from shadow to shadow. “Where to next?”

“That barn,” he replied, indicating an abandoned out building behind a farm on the outskirts of town. We dashed across a field under the dim light of the obscured moon, and hid in rotting straw. Nothing moved.

“All right. We know the factor's dishonest,” Dog explained. “If he isn't the one directly passing Ragara a bad product, he certainly isn't bothered by it.”

“The guy who kept babbling religion?” I asked.

“No one's that pious without being a filthy skimmer,” Dog replied.

“You know, I'm beginning to get the impression you aren't terribly fond of the Immaculate Faith,” Angel observed. “Any reason for your disparaging comments other than religious disdain?”

“I basically told him I'm swindling my backers, and he didn't so much as bat an eye. It's a scheme in mining, where you sign a contract where the backers make all the money off a set commodity provided they put up the overhead for the operation. Since we allegedly found no gold, they get none of the profit off our coal sales,” he explained. “It's a bait and switch, but a legal one. Anyway, he's crooked and posing behind false piety, which explains why he's willing to swindle a Dynast of the 'Isle.

“Besides, it allowed me to name drop the aliases we used on Ragara. If either he, or the guards, are in the employ of Maheka, they should get a message to him this evening. We have an appointment to show him some of our product first thing in the morning.”

“And then someone takes us to Maheka?” I asked.

“No. It's almost certain that whichever of them runs to Maheka, another will run to Ragara, if not two. The only one who won't run to Ragara is the scribe, who's ripping him off in the first place.”

“You should have been a politician,” I told him.

“Gods, no. Just get this done and let me go back to my mountain,” he replied.

“So how do we get in to see Maheka?” interrupted Angel. She didn't take well to scheming. It was outside her nature.

“I have no idea,” Dog replied innocently. “I forgot that was what we were trying to do in the fun of figuring out who was working for who.”

“Idiot!” hissed Angel.

“Why are you so mad?” asked Dog. “I thought The Ending was the psychotic impatient one?”

“I all but offered that thug a hand job because I thought you had a plan!” she snapped.

“Oh. I see,” responded Dog. “Well, you don't have to give him one, of course.”

I interrupted before she could beat him. “This isn't a problem. Serenading Thrush either works for

Maheka or against Ragara. Either way, he can get us where we want to go. We wait until he's alone, and then we make him take us to Maheka. We'll just stalk him in the mean time.”

With some grumbling, this was accepted by all. Sleep was almost upon me, and I could barely fight it off while sitting still. Therefore I suggested we creep back and watch for the scribe, who should be leaving soon. This was agreed upon, and we went.

I was wide awake again by the time we crouched down in the shadows between two gables of a steep roofed house by the docks. It was tiled with shale to better endure the howling snowstorms. We had to move carefully and take meticulous care to stand on the underlying beams lest we crash through. At some point later, a figure entered the room. The figure was small, and probably female. Shortly after her arrival the lights went out. We all hissed at each other, but no one was asleep. Bent by age, the wizened old con left, escorted by his two bull-necked and bovine-brained bodyguards. The woman went with them. We followed them to a narrow townhouse. Lights came on upstairs, and in a small room by the front door.

“Now we break in,” I concluded. This time they didn't argue with me.

Around the back of the row of clustered houses were small plots of land, fenced in and full of vegetables or chicken houses. Serenading Thrush had built his chicken coop directly against the back wall that the house would heat it in the winter. The roofs swept almost to the ground. Above that were wider windows with thick shutters, paned in with glass panels. None of the other houses had glass windows. These were dark on the second floor and barred. Above them was a bare wall, but above that were two small, narrow windows, also barred and shuttered, but lit from the inside. While we planned our incursion, one of the foundries across the town suddenly sent spires of flame into the sky. Its smoke stacks roared, and sent gouts of smoke into the dark air.

“It's the furnaces,” Clockwork Dog surmised. “They've been cleaned. I also bet that Ragara Aino is personally overseeing the operation right now, driving the old machinery with his own power. If they had better fuel, they'd make excellent steel. As is, it will be good enough.”

As the ashfall began to silently rain from the sky, darkening the night and filling our mouths with the taste of death, we stole down the row of houses until we found one dark and vacant. We broke in to find it was as deserted as promised. There were holes in the roof that let us atop the row of houses, each of which shared the roofline. Though the way was treacherous with crumbly soot falling like warm snow, we crept along on hands and knees. Eventually we counted seven chimneys, and were sure we stood almost above where Serenading Thrush slept. We exchanged a glance that explained everything. Mere mortals as we were, we had no powers that would enable us to silently intrude, and the kind of acrobatic nonsense required to move through a barred window was beyond us. Instead we listened carefully to the thin slates until we heard where Serenading Thrush was preparing himself for bed. I held up three fingers, removed one, removed another, and remove the third as we leaped in unison to come smashing down with locked knees on the roof.

It buckled. The tiles over spaces betwixt the beams shattered, dropping the three of us through the roof to an empty attic, the floor of which snapped like tinder beneath our sudden weights. Falling with a rain of splinters, we crashed into a frugal bedroom where Serenading Thrush was climbing into bed. Angel landed in the bed, broke the central beam, and the whole thing dropped six inches as the floor partially gave way, allowing the feet at all four corners through. The floor held the rest, except where Angel hit. There she was knee deep in feathers, while a naked screaming girl clutched the old geezer.

Dog found himself landing on a end table that simply ceased to exist in any recognizable form. I broke a desk in half with my feet, nearly broke my ankles on the floor, and let my legs buckle until I crashed into his chair. I leaned back and let the legs break, dropping it six inches to the floor. I glanced under the desk, and saw a large, iron bound chest bolted to the floor and a wall. I kicked it a few times, and it made rattling noises.

“Evening, Serenading Thrush,” I said lightly. “We have a bit more business to discuss.”

The girl kept shrieking. Dog observed from the floor, “She's a young one for an old goat like you.”

“What do you-”

“Shut up,” I replied. “Now, I will speak, you will listen, and if you don't want me to start breaking her fingers, you'll shut the girl up as well.”

“Do what you want with her!” cried Serenading Thrush. “The harlot means nothing to me.”

“Business is hard, honey,” observed Fall of Angels, extricating herself from the bed. “But that man right there is crazy. I'd stop making noises if he tells you too.” The girl shut up. Her skin was white with fear, and she huddled under the blankets.

“Puppy, Kitten, the guards will be coming up. I think I hear them on the stairs. Deal with them,” I ordered. Dog climbed to his feet and grabbed two table legs, one of which he passed to our comrade. She had finally gotten free of down and sheets, and they two of them stepped outside. I continued to regard the two in bed. “Now, you are going to answer some questions, and then take us to the house of Maheka, and you are going to get us in to see the man himself. The amount of bones we break of yours first is your discretion, as is the amount of your money we steal, and whether or not we also set your house on fire. Woman, stop whimpering, or I will stop you.”

She stopped. Serenading Thrush looked at me with his eyes bugging out. On the landing outside, sounds of horrible, violent conflict erupted to the tune of wood splintering and men screaming. I never took my eyes off him, for all things considered, I still had no doubts who would win.

“Who *are* you people?” he exclaimed, incredulous. He clearly couldn't believe what was happening.

“Fluffy Bunny,” I replied. “He's Fuzzy Puppy. She's Cuddly Kitten. I'm about to break your legs, and drag you by your spleen to Maheka. Stop asking stupid questions.”

The old man shut up. His hired companion for the night had finally got her breathing under control, and made no noise.

“Question one. Who killed Ash Maiden?”

“Who?”

“Don't answer a question with a question. It's rude,” I told him. At that instant, with a horrific crash, one of the club-men entered the room via a plank wall. Only his head, shoulders, and chest made it through, unfortunately, because a moment later he was yanked back out. His gurgling suddenly went quiet. “Ash Maiden was the young lady who was found in the Meander fourteen days ago.”

"I have no idea," the scared old goat pleaded.

"Are you lying to me?" I asked, rising from my seat. Outside the melee noises stopped.

"No!" he assured me with panic in his voice.

"Very well. You may take us to Maheka now." I turned, grabbed a robe off the floor, and tossed it to him. He stared putting it on in a panic. The girl was looking back and forth between us, scared and confused. I told her, "You are free to leave. Good bye." With that I grabbed the geezer, yanked him upright, and dragged him outside. Dog and Angel were standing on a pile of guards. They'd waylaid them each as they came up the stairs, and had used the height to compensate for Angel's lack of mobility and Dog's lack of skill in unmitigated violence. The two were sucking in air in deep gulps but looked unharmed. "We're leaving now."

"Good times, good times," gasped Dog.

"We're taking their swords," Angel told Serenading Thrush. "Unless you have a problem with that?"

"None at all!" he assured her.

"Good."

I lead the troop downstairs. Once in the street, we walked away from the house as neighbors looked from open windows and called out questions. They could see nothing in the pitch blackness of skies covered in smoke, and in this part of town no one had the money to waste candles. The sole light was the window leading to Serenading Thrush's room behind us, where the slim figure of the hired girl watched us go. Gently flakes of ash fell around us like burned snow.

No one interfered along our route through the city. When we came to the gate, we shoved our captive at the guards. "Tell them we're the ones who burned Ragara's house down. Tell them we want to see Maheka, and we have a business proposition for him."

"They'll never let us in!" he complained.

"Then we'll be stuck out here, with nothing to do. And I remember where your place is, where your money is, and where we may as well go back to until we can steal enough to bribe our way into an audience with Maheka," I replied.

"I'll see what I can do," he assured me. With that he hurried to the guards, and started talking animatedly. He was waving his arms and yelling. Two guards were dealing with him while two others and four on the wall kept close eyes on the three of us. They had bows and seemed familiar with their use.

After a few minutes, the guards came to us. "We're taking you to meet with Maheka Alron," they told us. "Don't try to resist."

"Dear child, that's the last thing on our minds," Angel assured them. They drew up around us, and marched us through the portcullis. Dog waved politely to Serenading Thrush as we walked past. The

old goat was looking at us like a sleeper who couldn't wake up from a horrible dream. As we passed inside, he suddenly realized he was free and ran off into the night with wild cackles testifying to his joy at being alive.

Maheka Alron didn't go for staggering ostentation quite like Ragara Aino did. His mansion was opulent to be sure, but the numerous mosaics were of religious significance instead of self aggrandizement. I suppose that humility in religion is easy when the religion tells you you're the apex of Creation, but I gave him points for trying. The walls and floor were well laid granite, intricately carved with designs and mandalas. All five elements repeated, though earth symbols were most common. More subtly displayed, his wealth was apparent in well crafted doors and rooms, a plethora of guards and servants that wore the best in armor and livery, and imported flatware and exotic fruits in baskets. Everything was amazingly functional, but no more expensive the best need be. His candelabra held candles, and lit his halls with warm light, but were made of fine steel, not gold inset with jade.

In time, we stopped in a formal receiving room. The guards handed us over to other guards, who bid us take seats in the sumptuously apportioned chairs. They were comfortable yet supportive. I thought I was seated on a cloud. The floor was tiled in blue, white, and brown, and showed towering mountains rising from the earth. Diamond stars sat in the ebony ceiling, laid in the shape of familiar constellations. In time, Maheka Alron arrived.

He was not so broad as Ragara Aino. Though they were each majestically build, Maheka's eyes had less charm and more intelligence. His fingers were narrow and dexterous, lacking Ragara's callouses. They had the same dark complexions, and calm demeanors. Dressed in a crimson and green evening robe, he looked like he'd just awoken but was still clear headed. He offered us wine and refreshment, which we politely declined, accepting only coffee for the sake of etiquette. It was a dark and potent beverage, full bodied. Every sip woke us up, and filled us with vigor.

"Now, my guests, I've been told you three claim to be the individuals who did such disrespect to Ragara Aino in his own home," he told us after our needs had been fulfilled. "Furthermore, you broke into the house of Serenading Thrush, one of my suppliers, accosted his men, and took him captive that he could get you an appointment to see me. You've broken virtually every law we have written down, and numerous unwritten ones no one has lacked the common sense to require committing to paper. Who are you, and what brings you before me?"

"I'm Fuzzy Bunny," I said. "He's Fluffy Puppy. She's Cuddly Kitten. Who killed Ash Maiden?"

"Who is this 'Ash Maiden?' Was she Exalted?" he asked.

"She was the young woman who a dock worker found drifting in the Meander fourteen days ago. She was beautiful and kind, and one of the best people to ever be born in Highmere. We want to know who killed her," I explained.

"Highmere? Is that a district of Nexus?"

"It's a village several days run from here in the mountains," Angel informed him.

"So she was a Fae noble? A local princess? The governor?" the terrestrial asked, trying to find a deeper meaning to our question that wasn't there.

“She was a young woman from a poor family. Her mother got sick with the consumption, so they sent her away so she would be safe. Her fiancée was supposed to follow her, but stayed behind to make sure that his mother-in-law to be was buried safely.” It wasn't easy to admit she'd had a fiancée and to acknowledge that it wasn't me.

“Wait,” interrupted our host. “This was a mortal? And a poor mortal at that?”

“Yes,” Clockwork Dog replied simply.

Maheka Alron lost his composure as for a brief instant he stared at us like he'd been assailed by a sorcerous talking weasel intent on finding who stole his favorite mouse tail. As awareness blossomed within in him that we were doing all this for the sole purpose of discovering a mortal, and that for that reason his illustrious Dragon-Blooded sleep was being disturbed, his face gradually turned astonishing shades of red and white until it settled into a deadly calm.

“I do not know. Not only do I not know, but I do not care. Your concerns are so far beneath me that I care less for the murder of one of my favorite mousers than I do for this Ash Woman. I thought you were here because you were powerful enough to assault Ragara in his own home, and set fire to it when you escaped.”

“We did,” Angel said perfectly levelly. “He didn't care about Ash Maiden either.”

There was something in her voice that stopped his automatic dismissal of our concern. For the first time the veils of sleep truly lifted from Maheka's eyes. Now he looked at us not as mortals, but as men given utterly to a terrible purpose without restraint. Angel suddenly appeared on his playing field as a dangerous force that could assail powers vastly greater than her own simply through desperation and wild abandon. Maheka considered us calmly, as was his nature, before he answered. “I do not know who killed her, nor for what reason. But for a price, I can find out.”

“Price is no object,” I replied evenly.

“I'm not talking about money,” he informed me. “Clearly, I have enough, and greatly doubt any meager financial remuneration you could offer me would significantly affect my fiscal stature. But if you have the will to enter my service, I have ways for you to earn my aid.”

“Lord Maheka, I understand you're a business man, or business Dynast, or whatever it is you call yourself, and to you haggling comes as easy as breath. Let me be simple. I don't care. I don't care about your prices, your services, or your tasks. None of that matters to me, because none of it is what killed Ash Maiden. This what will happen. You will find out who killed her. You will then tell us. We will then go off and deal with it. The rest is meaningless detail. Do you understand?”

“That rudeness borders on treason, something I am perfectly vested and capable of dealing with myself,” Maheka replied ominously.

“Yes, but you won't,” Dog replied. He sighed with the same show of weariness he had when explaining the political-economic situation of Nibeldamt to us. “Ragara tried. It didn't work so well for him. The ensuing fight left his mansion on fire, and his affairs disrupted. Right now you're in a position to seize that advantage, precisely because none of what happened to him has happened to you. What we're offering you is that we won't happen to you, leaving you in a marvelously better bargaining stance than

you were in this time yesterday. In exchange, tell us who killed Ash Maiden. It couldn't be simpler.”

“In fact, we've already paid you our end of the bargain. All up front with no negotiations,” Angel supplied. “You can't get better terms than that.”

“Are you threatening me?” asked Maheka astonished. That we had gone beyond common insolence to this boggled his mind. I don't think he'd ever been threatened by mortals before.

“Yes,” we replied in unison. We were getting better about that. It came much more naturally now.

“I should kill you right now,” he exclaimed and started to rise.

“Sit down, Lord Maheka,” ordered Angel, her voice dropping down to a deep, subdued menace. “You'll kill one of us to be sure. Possibly two, and if you're very lucky, all three. But right now you're here with us, and I swear to all the Forgotten Gods that you will not walk out of this room alive should blades be drawn.” When she spoke her voice crackled as powers far outside the ken of mortal men took notice of her oath and sanctified it.

“The only way we can win against you,” Dog explained. “Is to take this to a level you're not willing to follow. You have wealth. You have money. You have security. We have nothing but an unconditional need to see a murderer found. Lord, we make no pretensions that we're you're equal, but you aren't a great power capable of smashing us with impunity, or else you wouldn't be in a piss-ant little town like Nibeldamt, and you certainly would have overcome Ragara by now. So just tell us what we want to know, and we'll go away, and you can reap the harvest of the whirlwind we've already sown in the manor of Ragara Aino.”

Maheka glanced at Angel, then at Dog, and finally at me. “You spoke a great deal at the beginning, but now have fallen silent. Do you understand that your companions are bargaining your life away?”

“Yes,” I replied with a soft smile.

“You aren't a power like they are,” he told me, looking deep into my eyes and letting his will bore into mine. “You know I could kill you. You know the certainty of your fate.” His mind was like an avalanche, crashing against me with will greater than mortal minds possess. Pure Essence raged against my sanity and sought to bend me into submission. “I'll put you to sleep forever,” he assured me and let all his power howl through the silent doorways of my mind.

I leaned forward as well and met his glare. “It would be a pleasure,” I replied, and the force he brought to bear smashed against the truth of the statement.

Maheka sat back, baffled at his lack of success. He truly did not understand why we didn't submit to his will. Never in his experience had he met mortals such as we, cushioned as he'd always been by those so overwhelmed at his innate greatness that they'd affirmed his domination in their thought and deed. He just didn't understand us. His consternation slowly gave way to thoughtfulness, which gently slid into amusement as he cracked a wide smile, and leaned back in his chair.

“You know, mortals, I will give you credit. I honestly never expected to have such a conversation, much less in my home. I'm rather impressed. So much so, in fact, that I'm curious to see what you would do next. Are you brave, crazy, or stupid? I imagine I'll find out soon enough.” Once he had

found his calm again, even buffeted by our tension, he was like a rock, and impassive as the ancient hills. “The woman in the river was named Ash Maiden? I didn't know that. Nor what happened to her.” His voice as solid as old rocks.

Wry thoughts of caution told me this sudden change of tact was dangerous. While I was trying to figure out what angle he was playing Dog asked, “What about Frozen Thane? What do you know of him?”

“The Ice Walker?” replied Maheka curiously. He cocked his head at the apparent non-sequitur. “Very little. He has avoided the steel industry, so I ignored him. The only reason I know the name is about a month ago someone came to me looking for him. She said I could make a significant profit by handing him over. Still, it sounded like a private matter so I stayed out of it. Getting involved in private feuds does me no good.” The last he said archly, indicating the three of us and our situation with his eyes.

“Who came looking for him?” Angel asked.

“Some woman from the north. She said her name was Defile Perilous; most likely a pseudonym. She had very pale skin, almost white blue lips. Attractive in an icicle way. She sounded emotional,” he pronounced the adjective scornfully. “And there's no reason to get between two Ice Walkers. She probably had two of his kids and then he ran out on her.”

“Where can we find her?” she pressed.

“I have no idea,” the scion of Maheka replied. “As I said, I stay out of such affairs.”

Before either of the rest of us could answer, Dog thanked Maheka for his help. “It's been wonderful meeting you, and I am amazed at the grace of your house. Now, if we'll be leaving. I hope we can maintain our cordial terms long enough for the three of us to depart without having to burn anything down?”

Maheka raised one eyebrow. “That's it?”

“Unless you'd like us to stay for crumpets,” Dog replied. We all rose, following his lead.

“One question. Which of you burned Ragara's house down?”

“We did,” I replied, indicating myself and Clockwork Dog. “But it was his idea.”

Maheka laughed and shook his head. “You must be stupid. Maybe crazy, but definitely stupid. Good bye, children. Do not come to see me again.”

“Aw, does this mean we can't be buddies?” asked Angel.

“No.”

We departed. A butler and a small horde of personal guards escorted us outside, and firmly locked the front gate behind us. Silhouetted by candle light, Maheka Alron watched us depart from a tower window. Once we were off his property, Dog bowed fluidly, and we hastened into Nibeldamt.

“So, what did you learn?” I asked him once we were under cover.

“Maheka's a liar, and Defile Perilous works for Ragara. At least Maheka wants us to think she does. Now that I think about it, the bruises on Ash Maiden's throat could have been made by a woman, though she would have been abnormally strong,” Dog summarized.

“Might I ask-” I began.

“Maheka claims he never gets involved in personal feuds. Our feud is as personal as it gets, and he spoke to us. Especially given he let us in to see him the first time because we mentioned what we'd done to his competition. Afterwards he made a point to mention the northwoman, and imply he didn't involve himself. That's a hint Ragara did.” Dog cut me off, getting to the point quickly. We were training him so well.

“So we go back to Mansion Ragara and do more violence upon him,” I surmised. “That works for me.”

“Not necessarily,” Angel argued. “Maheka could be trying to manipulate us into just that. He only gains when we make trouble for Ragara.”

“She has a point,” Dog agreed with her. “This one didn't underestimate us nearly as badly as Ragara did. He might well be using us as disposable mercenaries, made all the better because he hasn't paid us anything. This is a good deal for him, and he knows it.”

“And we have only his word that this 'Defile Perilous' is in any way connected with Frozen Thane, and through him Ash Maiden,” Angel continued. “No one else has mentioned her.”

“Oh. Damn.” My simplistic plan of action fell apart before me.

“You must be tired,” Dog observed. “Otherwise you wouldn't have missed that.”

“I haven't been sleeping well,” I understated. From there I changed the topic. “So all that was a waste?”

“Not a waste. We learned a great deal. Maheka's usable. He's willing to play the game to get what he wants, but he's a very cagey player. Should this lead about the ice walker woman pan out, we can probably rely on him to be consistently dishonest so long as it works for him. In addition, if we find ourselves in a bind, he might help us for the right price,” Dog concluded.

“Not bad for pushing a bluff.” Angel sounded pleased with herself. Her voice patted us all on the back.

“Pushing a bluff?” I asked.

“Ending, my leg is still all but broken, and walking without limping was damn near killing me. I wasn't talking like that because I was threatening him, but because my entire left side is in agony. And isn't your hand still broken?” she responded.

To be honest, I hadn't thought about it. “Yes, but Shogg stopped the bleeding.”

“Maheka might well have been capable of putting all three of us down at once without too much of a problem. I have to admit, though, when you told him you it would be a pleasure to die, that was one of the best bits of acting I've seen. That probably tipped the balance in favor of dealing with us over

fighting.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Acting.”

They looked at me strangely.

“Let's get some sleep,” Dog concluded. “It's been a long day.”

That was the one thing I really didn't want to do, but couldn't convince them otherwise. Soon enough we found a deserted shack on the outskirts of town. Wrapped in our thick cloaks, we bedded down on dusty piles of rusted farm equipment. After they were snoring, I watched the door, playing mind games with myself to stay awake. In time I lost.

In silver moonlit fields of waving wheat high above the clouds that boiled against the mountains like a frothy sea I walked with a girl I'd just met. Here and there the obsidian shards of Jaggerfall's great towers lanced above the mists far below us. On this meadow only the resilient blue wheat could grow. Even the lichens of lower altitudes couldn't cling to the stones. But the azure seed heads beat against my thighs in the relentless winds, reminding me that something survived here. I had just come to Highmere with my master, and the girl was the first person I'd met.

“Why don't you like talking about your past?” she had asked me. Her hair was the color of sunshine.

“Why don't you like talking about your name?” I countered. It was hard to keep track of what was the dream, and what was a memory.

“I don't like it much,” she admitted. “It sounded nice, but the more I think about it, the less I like it.”

“It's a beautiful name. It's quiet, but mysterious,” I told her.

“What good comes from ashes?” she pouted. “Nothing. Ash is what's left over when good things burn up.”

“Well, at least you still have the maiden part,” I retorted, flicking her lower lip. It completely ruined her attempt at looking petulant, and she knew it. In retaliation she stopped ignoring my disinclination to answer her first question.

“So, where did you live before you came here?” she probed.

“Somewhere else.”

“Why did you leave?”

“To come here.”

“Are you going to stay here?” she continued, refusing to either rise to the bait or be distracted.

“I might,” I replied.

“Don't you like it here?” she asked.

“I like you.”

She flushed and looked off over the mountains. Ash Maiden had never been good at taking compliments. “Then don't leave,” she concluded simply. Wisps of gold hair entangled themselves in her lips and caught there. “Because if you like me, you won't leave me.”

“Ending, dogs,” whispered Angel in a sharp voice. She hadn't been there at the meadow. I hadn't even met her until much later. I twisted to look at her, and I saw her in ash covered clothes underneath a dirty sky. Frantically I looked away like a twisted Orpheus, but Ash Maiden was gone, and only Clockwork Dog was there, watching the street from a broken window. In the distance the howls of hounds echoed across the murky sky. The sun couldn't shine through the soot.

“Joy, the waking world,” I lamented quietly. “How many, how far?”

“At least two. Maybe as many as six. I can't hear people. If they're after us, we need to leave.”

“Of course they're after us,” Dog interjected.

“Then we leave,” I agreed with Angel. I stretched the kinks out of my back, and got ready to run. She had already packed up everything we had.

“What's the point?” Dog asked. “We can't outrun bloodhounds.”

“Actually, we can,” I disagreed. “It's hard, but possible. And if we can't do that, we can beat the dog handlers. But we need to go.”

Dog and Angel exchanged another glance, identical to one I'd exchanged with Angel not a day before. She asked, “Are you sure about this?”

“Trust me,” I replied. “Now hurry.”

We broke from cover and raced down a street. The wind was coming from the east, over the river, which suited my purpose just fine. We went upwind to the docks, plunged into the water icy cold with glacial runoff, and swam down stream. In the water our filthy cloaks pulled us down, and we shucked them. By the time we made it to the far bank, my muscles were cold and tired. We scaled the steep bank, and put some distance between us and the town.

Our lead had stretched to perhaps three hours when we saw several rowboats laden with men and hounds punt across the fast flowing river. We were going north along the line of a ridge, letting the wind come from the side and blow most of our scent away. While the baying grew louder from behind us, we gained elevation until my temples throbbed like nails piercing towards my brain. Once on the ridge line we fled, always seeking a harder path. A two foot step was tiring for us, but would force a bloodhound to detour. By the time the posse broke open terrain and stood silhouetted against the sky, we were miles ahead, running down a gorge. The wind tore up past us, hurling along until it merged with the open sky. High cross winds caught it there, daubing traces of it against the mountain tops.

Not far down the gorge was a shadowed patch of snow, protected from the burning sun by a naked stone arrat. On the far side, another ridge climbed back into the sky, while small creeks of snow melt

collected around its edges, flowing downhill. We followed one down until it entered a defile like the one we'd just quit before doubling back and heading to the ridge. Once there, the wind came from the other side of the mountain. We left a second false path plunging into a ravine where the wind shrieked downhill. It would carry our scent far below, where the gorge opened up onto an alpine meadow. The trackers would need to take the hounds all the way down to be sure we hadn't gone that way. Meanwhile, on the ridge top, we chose shoulders and prominences that lead us always into the wind, walking on rock as much as possible. It was exhausting, made worse because we had no water or food.

This far from Nibeldamt the clouds of smoke ended, letting sunlight finally through. Our clothes dried in the powerful winds of the high mountains. While we saved most of our breath for the run, occasionally one of us would point out some natural feature that rose in stark isolation against the sky. No people lived here, few animals, and the plants that could endure fought against the environment in a perpetual struggle. When the sun was directly over head we looked back and couldn't see any of our pursuit.

“Think we lost them?” Angel asked.

“No. The handlers are resting their beasts. They should have brought food and water for all. But they can't afford to waste too much time, because even a bloodhound's nose will loose a trail after a while.” I scanned the sky, hoping for traces of rain which would well and truly finish our pursuit. There were none.

“Food and water would be good for us too,” Dog observed. “This high up the dry air will suck the moisture from our bodies.”

“I know. I'm thinking,” I replied.

“Ending, can we really outrun bloodhounds?” Angel asked. The strain was cracking her composure, letting doubts seep to the surface.

I looked at her, then sat down for a breather. “If you're going to beat a dog team, you do one of three things. Beat the dog, beat the handler, or beat the handler's trust of the dog. If you can, you do all three. Every false path we leave means the dogs have to check a little further then we go. In addition, some of the animals will be fooled, and some won't. The handlers see the division in the pack and think they're losing the trail, and then the humans get tempted to override the dogs' noses. People will start arguing. Animals will get weary. As long as we give them no reinforcement, they're lose morale slowly. Plus, in the mountains, the rocks will hurt the pads of a dog's foot, making it go slowly and pick its way. The handlers can't go ahead, and when the going is easy, the dog's are held back to the pace of their two footed companions.”

“But can it really work?” Dog asked. “A bloodhound can follow a trail that's weeks old. Even all this will only delay the inevitable.”

“I'm here, aren't I?” I shrugged. “This isn't the first time someone's sicked dogs on me.”

“You didn't lead a very honest life before coming to Highmere, did you?” he observed.

“And you lead one where you rubbed elbows with Dynasts,” I countered. “Listen, this isn't a battle of wits or wills. It's just stamina. If we can keep going long enough, they will lose our scent. All we need

to do is keep leaving false trails and running.”

“Terrestrials,” Dog corrected me absently. Still, he rose and stretched. With a smile and a shrug he added, “All right then, let's go.”

“Ending, I've been chased by dogs too,” Angel said softly. “It didn't work out so well for me.”

“This time it will,” I assured her. I pointed at a neighboring ridge. “Now we'll head to that patch of snow there. We can drink some of the melt.”

At the next juncture we split and left false trails across two ridgelines and down a cut. Choosing to head downwind, we actually followed the nastiest nastiest, leading to high crags filled with hollows that the wind would saturate with our scent. We broke off suddenly and took a goat trail down that kept the wind at our backs. Hopefully our pursuers wouldn't be able to tell our scent wasn't just pushed down by the wind until they had to back track. At the bottom of the goat trail, we found a tiny stream. It was big enough to slake our thirsts and little more. Small berries grew in bunches along the waterway, but none of us recognized them. We didn't eat to the complaints of our empty stomachs.

While we rested, the winds carried the echoes of baying hounds across the mountains. The dells seemed filled with phantom hunting packs, and they called to each other across the open sky. We grew quiet for a moment, listening.

“They're calling to their own echoes,” Dog suddenly concluded. “They don't know it's the sound of their own barking thrown back at them.”

“How far?” Angel asked.

“Maybe a mile. Maybe less,” he judged.

Our lead had been cut to less than half, in spite of my precautions. I wanted to swear, but couldn't waste the breath. “Come on. I have a few tricks left up my sleeve.”

Giving up any pretense of subtlety, we raced down a rocky shoulder, keeping off the crest. The pack behind us was baying loudly. Confused animals were crying at the rocks, while their masters tried to make sense of dog cries. We skirted the edge of the snow field to open grass, heading upwind. That plunged into a narrow dell, shadowed by the lofty peaks in the evening. We made it to the bottom by the time the posse sorted out our false trails. Once they started down, our scent would be plain as day, but there was no help for that. They were too close for tricks.

“These guys are good,” I judged.

“Yeah. It's almost like we angered someone with enough money to hire the best trackers,” Dog wryly quipped.

“Who would do such a thing?” Angel asked, seeming shocked.

“Bad people,” I told her. “Bad people who would set fire to the grass. Let them breath smoke.”

Without a word, Clockwork Dog pulled out his flint and steel. Angel and I grabbed dry grass and

shredded it. Soon we had a bed of tinder, and caught sparks. It began to smolder, then sizzle, and soon tiny licks of flame emerged from their dry nest to feed on the wild grass around. The winds kissed the fire, building it up, until smoke spread out from where we stood in an expanding half circle. It spread up and down the mountain side, hemmed by the rocks above and snow filled shadows below. The trackers came around a corner and spotted us, but between us was a racing blaze. They turned and fled, chased in turn by a grass fire.

“Oddly fitting, to use fire to deter pursuit by men hired by a crimson dragon,” Dog observed with detached amusement. We set off again. Angel's limp was coming back. It had faded for a while when we first set out, but the reprieve granted her by a night's sleep was wearing off. In spite of the success of the fire gambit, I began to worry.

Our dell was a cleft between two ridges, each topped with stony spines. Neither was snow capped but would retain snow in patches until late summer where the shoulders blocked the sun, and left deep shadows year round. The patch above us was melting as the wildfire swept around it, pouring water down across burnt terrain. Only the roots of the grass remained. I stared around for a while, then looked at my companions. Speckled with grime, they were resolute. All of us were exhausted. We looked beaten in body. Still, there was no trace of resignation or despair. Dog only worried about Angel, and she would accept my words. If necessary, she'd run herself to death. The dirty water of the river Meander mixed with soot from the foundries, and tattooed us like mad savages. The image was apt.

I cocked my head, and watched the smoke blow in the wind. It raced east, both the way we came, and down the dell, towards lower ground. The snowfield was still melting above us.

“Come on. I have another idea.”

We buried ourselves in dirty snow. It was loosely covered in soot from the grass fire, turning the surface opaque. I piled snow on Dog and Angel, and then entombed myself. Our smell must have been mostly ash and sweat, hopefully overshadowed by the fire. I thought the hounds might lose our scent, and seek down the dell, searching for us in a false path like the many we'd left before. Besides, it would be dark soon. The hounds would need to sleep.

Not long after we had hidden ourselves, we heard the tentative howls of the dog teams. They approached after the fires blew out, and searched the burn sight for a while. We stayed still, waiting. Eventually, they headed away, and the sounds of dog and man faded.

We broached the surface, busting upwards into twilight. There was no one around. Short smiles were exchanged, and then we fled back uphill. The stone spine of the ridge carried us downwind, and the setting sun lit the world in garish relief. Once it sank below the far reaches of Creation, we marched by starlight. Three hours later we finally curled up in a pile and slept like the dead.

Dawn broke. Pieces of it went everywhere. I dragged myself from the huddle and into the cold morning air. Behind me, Dog was curled into a ball, while Angel lay draped across him, gnawing on the back of his head in her sleep. We'd eaten nothing since the berries Shogg had provided, and that was days ago. With luck the trackers would be just setting out to reacquire our trail, and they wouldn't find it until noon. My sleep had not been dreamless, and being active provided me some relief from recalling the nocturnal visions. I scavenged for roots and edible flowers, and by the time the others awoke had three small piles ready. They would digest slowly, giving us the feeling of being full for hours. We drank snow melt, and stared off into the mountains, watching the morning sun on the clouds.

“What's the plan? Another day of running through the mountains?” Dog asked.

“No point in that,” I admitted. “Sooner or later trackers will realize they don't need to follow us. They know where we're going, and can just wait for us back at Nibeldamt.”

“So, what next?” Dog reiterated.

“We go to Nibeldamt first,” Angel answered before I could. “We've left enough fake trails to keep them occupied while we make a mad dash for the city. Once we get there we find Frozen Thane, and ask him questions about Defile Perilous and Ash Maiden. Both Ragara and Maheka are stonewalling us, maybe the Ice Walker will spill some information.” Clearly she and I were thinking the same way.

“Shouldn't we go hide somewhere and lick our wounds?” Dog suggested.

“That's just what they expect us to do,” I declined.

“Because that's the only plan that isn't stupid,” Dog rebutted.

I shrugged. Angel looked off into the distance, distracted by the interplay of light and shadow across the naked stone of the mountains. “There's food in town. Water too. We need that,” she said absently.

“Anything else is just a distraction,” I told him. “Ragara knows we'll be back. The longer we wait, the more chance we give his wife and their personal army to return. Time is against us.”

“But we're half dead!” Dog exclaimed. “Angel, you can't walk! I haven't seen Ending use his right hand in two days. You shattered every bone in your hand when you hit him, and his jaw healed almost instantly. We can't hurt this guy!” Desperation that Dog had been keeping at bay through willpower alone was getting the best of him, working its insidious damage when he was weak with hunger. “What can we do?”

“What can we do now?” I asked very softly, keeping my voice low in an attempt to make him lower his own. “What if we find out Ragara actually did it? What if it's his fault, and we need to kill him? What then?”

“What if his wife is stronger than he is?” Angel continued. “What if we can't finish his until she returns, and they put an army between them and us, equipped better than we are, better fed, better armed, and outnumber us twenty to one? What then, Dog?”

“I don't know!” he lamented. “I don't know what to do. I can't figure out any way we win.”

Angel rose and walked over to him. He was perched on a small rock with his head in his hands, exhausted. Sinking down beside him, Angel wrapped one of her arms over his shoulders and pulled him gently against her. Dog didn't resist.

“Dear, we knew the odds to begin with. We knew we were up against forces so far beyond us we aren't even playing the same sport. We knew this,” she reminded him softly.

“I don't think I can watch you die,” he responded quietly. “I can go myself, but I can't watch you get

beaten to death.”

“You always were more compassionate,” I told him. I slid over until I was sitting with the two of them, making a visible show of solidarity. “Angel is brave. I’m just a maniac.”

“Determined, Ending. You’re the determined one,” Angel chided me.

“But what can we do against that? Against terrestrials?” Dog asked.

“Whatever we have to,” I answered. “We find our strengths, and their weaknesses. Maheka never would have spoken to us if we’d played his game, but he did. We find a way to make ourselves greater, and hit them while they’re weak. Besides, we don’t even know if Ragara did it. Maybe he just knows something. We won’t fight him if we don’t have to.”

Dog sat very still for a long time, his palms pressed against his head. Finally he looked up at us. He stared at Angel, and then said to me, “Fine. I’ll follow you to the end, till we find Bright Leaf’s truth in your name. I said I would, and I will keep that word. But if we have to fight one of them again, I go first. I can’t watch, if there’s nothing I can do against the Dynast.”

“That’s very brave,” Angel told him.

“Not really,” he denied. “I’m more scared of watching you get hurt than dying.”

“There’re two ways to deal with fear,” she explained. “You’re taking the noble one. Don’t be ashamed of fear, because that just means you’re sane. Even if it feels like it emasculates you, don’t worry, for we feel the same.”

“He doesn’t,” Dog argued, but there was a touch of his own self in his words. He indicated me with his head as he spoke.

“Well, I said fear means you’re sane,” Angel replied urbanely. “We don’t accuse The Ending of sanity very often.”

“I think I’m insulted,” I observed without feeling it. For a moment I thought I would have to do this without him, and that did frighten me.

“The truth hurts,” Dog replied. With a grunt, he rose and shook himself like his namesake. “Whatever. Let’s get on with it.”

“After that touching display of affection, I’m almost ashamed to interrupt,” interjected a new voice. Our heads snapped towards the east, where a man stood. He’d come from the direction of the sun, hidden by the dawn’s light. Now he stood on a rock, outlined against a white sky. Dirty leather pants were tucked into dirty leather boots, under a shirt of dirty leather. He had a wide sun hat, and a short, light sword rode on his hip. Across his back was a bow and a quiver of hunting arrows. His beard was scraggly and unkempt, and couldn’t be determined from his hair. Oddly, it had a natural look to it, down brown like tree bark. His eyes were a piercing green, that showed none of the disregard of his outwards appearance. When he spoke he showed his teeth, pure white, also presenting a contrast to his filthy appearance. “But I must. I’ve been hired by the town of Nibeldamt to arrest you three, so that’s why I’m here.”

“On what charges?” Dog snapped. There was some fire in him again.

“The murder of Serenading Thrush,” he replied.

“We never hurt him!” I retorted.

“I don't care,” the mountain man replied. “But you're under arrest all the same.”

“And what if we don't go willingly?” Angel asked very softly in her impending murder voice.

“Then we do this the fun way, the way your compatriot just tearfully admitted he didn't want to see,” the tracker replied. With a grin, he drew his short heavy blade. “I'm taking you in, but if we have to wait until the others finally get past that maze of false trails you left, you don't have to walk. I'll happily put you down so you can't walk.”

Angel rose as well, and fluidly slipped the sword she'd taken from Serenading Thrush's guard from its sheath. She put Dog behind her and stepped into a guard stance.

“You carry his weapons, and yet you protest your innocence?” he asked. “Well, at least that will ease my conscience.”

“My name is Fall of Angels. Neither I nor my two companions has injured Serenading Thrush in anyway, for I have been with them every moment since I saw him alive and free. But I will not go willingly.”

“Angel, please,” interrupted Dog. “Don't make me watch this.”

“Don't worry,” she replied. “I think I can take one mountain man.” Without further word, they came together.

The crash of steel on steel rocked the mountains, and waves of sound ricocheted from the peaks. The mountaineer was fast and elusive, while Angel could barely move, forced to fight statically by her bad leg. But their blades whipped back and forth, tracing patterns of sparks in the morning air. Their weapons whistled like songbirds. Finally her attacker tumbled backwards and rolled out of range.

“God, woman,” he exclaimed as he got to his feet. Were she healthy he never would of made it, but now Angel listed to her right when she stood, favoring her back leg.

“If you leave now, we won't chase you,” she told him. “We bear you no grudge.”

“No, I don't think so,” he replied, carefully getting to his feet. “I won't suffer three murderers to escape.”

“We didn't kill him,” I said. “When he left us at the gates of Maheka's mansion, he was hale and healthy. The guards will tell you that.”

“And after you left house Maheka you strangled him and dumped him in the river,” the tracker countered. “You broke into his house and found his strong box the first time, and then you forced the

secret of opening it from him before you killed him. You've even got his weapons.”

“Then why would we have strangled him?” interjected Dog. “We would have just run him through.”

“I don't know. But I also don't care,” he replied.

“Was he strangled by a woman?” I suddenly asked. Pieces were falling together in my head.

“Probably her, to cover her tracks,” he replied.

“No, not her. But a woman would have small hands,” I replied.

“Whatever that means,” the tracker dismissed my statement. “But I'm not going to let you keep murdering people, regardless of whether you're greedy or crazy. You're coming with me, now.”

“No,” Angel replied. “We're not. And you're going to need to be much better than that to take us.”

The tracker smiled. “Much better? Very well then. My name is Beast of the Oak Forest. And while you may know a celestial form, child, skill only does so much without power behind it. Let me show you power.”

“Oh, no,” someone whispered. I'm not entirely sure who. Beast of the Oak Forest suddenly exploded in leaves and twisting vines, and his eyes blazed with brilliant green light. The grass under his feet writhed and straining upwards, growing preternaturally fast and reaching for the light of his aura. Ragara had hired the best money could find. Angel withstood the assault for only a few seconds before she dropped. Dog threw himself over her, but the tracker beat him unconscious with his sword pommel. Every stroke was perfect, a testament to Terrestrial power. While he was distracted I leaped onto his back. I lasted no better, but before I went down I sank my teeth into the Wood Aspect's leg. He didn't even have to beat me unconscious. Instead he just turned up the power of his anima until I could see Essence racing through his veins like ancient tree roots burrowing through the earth. The might blasted my face away and left me dazed and concussed.

“Murderer,” he whispered and took my consciousness with his boot.