

### Act 3

I may as well tell you now that it was four days before I woke up. Not that I had any idea when darkness receded, and I looked up at the stone ceiling of my cell. It might have been a moment; it could have been a decade. My hands and legs were bound with iron shackles. Dog and Angel lay on other wooden biers, similarly restrained. We were in the same cell. Later I found out our captor, the Sheriff of Nibeldamt, had left us in her to recuperate or die as our fate dictated. It would have saved him a lot of problems if we'd have just died. Certain parties wouldn't have been pleased, as they wanted us to endure a kangaroo court and public execution. Still, I wasn't ready to go quietly into the long night. Instead I woke up gasping, terribly thirsty, and ravenously hungry.

"Hush," murmured a soft voice at my side. A strong hand lifted my head, and put a bowl of water to my lips. I drank until it was empty. The hand lowered my head, and I heard the bowl sloshing in a bucket of water. "Here. There's more."

I drank again. The water tasted like blood. At first I thought it was contaminated, but then I realized I could taste blood when the bowl was gone. My tongue found dozens of scabbed sores in my mouth from where Beast of the Oak Forest's anima had shredded my mouth. As feeling returned and my limbs reported their condition to my mind, I realized I was in even worse shape than after my beating at the hands of Ragara.

"My body hurts," I gurgled from cracked lips.

"That will happen," the soft voice replied. "I've bandaged you, and tended to your wounds, but there are many of them."

"Thank you," I whispered. That didn't hurt as much as talking.

For a while I lay in silence. I knew what I had to do next. I knew why it was necessary. But I didn't want to. My pride simply refused to accept the right choice, and I had to wrestle it down until the indomitable ego that had driven me along submitted. I never thought making a choice could be hard. Carrying it through could be hard. Enduring the consequences could be hard. But for the first time I realized thinking a thought, and admitting something in the silences of my own mind was damn near impossible. Only knowing that it had to be done forced me on. It was only another price I was willing to pay.

"Hail, I'm sorry. I got them hurt."

"I know you did," Hail replied. Though I hadn't seen him since the meeting after the funeral, I couldn't wonder why he was here now. We needed him, and since appearing would be the right thing to do, he had. "You failed them. You failed Clockwork Dog, who trusted you, and Fall of Angels, who loved you."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You're both wrong about one thing," whispered Dog from where he lay. Neither of us had realized he was awake. "Angel never loved you, Ending. She never loved me either, but she never loved you."

"Bullshit," snapped Hail. "She's been in love with him since she met him. I've seen it in her eyes for

years.”

“That's because she's in love with you, asshole. And you've been too blind to see it,” Dog retorted.

“He's right, you know,” I told Hail. “You see love in her eyes because you're the the one. She almost knocked me unconscious when I was going to say something that would hurt you before we left. She'll leap to your defense any time. She came with me because of Ash Maiden, but that's because she knew you wanted too but wouldn't. Some thing about it not being the right thing to do.”

“What?” Hail retorted like we both raved in madness.

“Stupid ass. Don't you think I've memorized every thing she does?” Dog asked. He tried to say more but lost it coughing. Hail went to his side and gave him water from the bowl. After a moment, he continued. “You don't know how obvious it. You don't know how jealous I've been, and how much I wanted this to succeed because for once I'd have done something with her that you wouldn't. Instead you get the girl. And you're too stupid to appreciate it because both of you are still mooning over Ash Maiden.”

“None of this is my fault!” Hail yelled. “All I wanted was her and she said yes! She came here to get Anvil's approval, because her family couldn't afford a dowry, and the girl was too old fashioned to realize I couldn't have given a damn about a dowry when I was getting her! All I ever wanted was her, and that's all I ever asked for. I even let her go to him-” he snapped a furious glance over his shoulder at me, “because I wanted her to be free to choose, and she still chose me!”

He was leaning over Dog, snarling at the wounded man, and suddenly realized what he was doing and stopped. Instead he stalked back to me, a better target for his rage. “Do you have any idea what I've been through? Can you imagine how angry I've been? Can you conceive the depths of my own hurt after the girl I'm going marry dies in a foreign city. Gods, I wanted revenge more then you did, because you were just bitter. You'd already lost her, but I had to deal with that at the same time as she died. But I had to give up revenge, because she wouldn't have wanted me too, and then I had to let you miserable bastards go without me and live in terror, waiting for word that this had happened because I knew it would eventually! With Ash Maiden dead and everyone else off trying to get killed, and I had to stay home where every rock, tree, and mountain tears a hole in my heart because it reminds me of her. Do you have any idea how terrified I'd be that you were going to die too, and then I'd have no one?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “I know. And I'm sorry for that too. It's all my fault.”

Hail started cursing at me. Graphic, violent, blasphemous dirty words spat from his mouth in complex and inventive curses, clearly polished through days of sitting at home, suffering in impotent silence. Ranging in pitch, timbre, and volume, he held nothing back as he unleashed a typhoon of profanity on me, swelling in obscenity until it past beyond the language of swearing and became an art in foul-mouthed vitriol. I had no idea what he even called me with his final epithet. Words defeated me. I stared up silently, because there was no response I could possibly give to that level of insult.

“Hail, I think you won,” Dog observed from his table.

“I haven't won a damn thing,” Hail countered. Then he busied himself examining our injuries, working silently because he didn't trust himself to speak.

“How is she?” I asked after he'd changed the bandages on both Dog and I. He was working on Angel's leg very slowly, barely touching her at all.

“Not good,” he answered. “She lost a lot of blood internally. I think it's only partially healed, reopening from time to time.” His words were carefully neutral.

“Has she woken up at all?” I continued. Talking about Angel wouldn't incite another rage, and we all needed to stay calm.

“Once or twice, but she was delirious. Dog's been awake off and on since I got here, yesterday. Anvil sent me word when Ragara Aino had the sheriff send the posse out after you. I came as fast as I could. You were more than half dead. No one had bothered to wet your lips while you slept. Dog had woken up a few times, and called for food and water. Sometimes the guards gave it to him, sometimes they didn't. Everyone's hoping you will all just die quietly,” he explained.

“Feh,” I disabused him of that notion. “We're much too obnoxious to do that.”

“I know,” Hail acknowledged. “Don't get me wrong, you stupid jackass. I'm glad you're not dead. And I hope you get better and make tons of problems for everybody, but even if you do, they're just going to hang you from the rafters. Ragara Aino is picking out hanging ropes for the three of you.”

“You aren't very cheerful,” Dog told him. “Have I ever mentioned that?”

“What do you want? Sunshine and puppies?” Hail snapped.

“Yes, actually. Bring me puppies. Fluffy ones.”

“What? Like those joke names we used when we had to visit the sick kids after Ending got us in trouble for throwing tomatoes at the mayor?” Hail asked, wryly.

“You know, there's a funny story about that,” I told him.

“I do know. I was there,” Hail replied.

“No. There's a second one,” Dog corrected him.

“Why don't you tell me?” Hail asked, taking a seat beside Angel. He hadn't looked at her quite the same since Dog had told him how she really felt so blatantly. Now he looked embarrassed and slightly uncomfortable around her. The other two of us told him the story from when we'd left Highmere to him finding us. He cracked up when we told him the pseudonyms we'd used, sighed as I explained how I'd tried to set Dog and Angel up, and mulled over the information that it had been a woman who'd killed Serenading Thrush. I revealed my suspicions, and he listened to them carefully. “It's possible,” he admitted. “You have circumstantial evidence at best, and that's very thin, but it's possible.”

“What we need to do is get out of here and track down Frozen Thane. He should have the answers we need,” I concluded.

“You aren't getting out of here, Ending,” Hail informed me with a sigh. “In a couple days, you'll be tried, found guilty, and summarily executed. Clockwork Dog will go first, because they already know

he's awake. Also, for some reason, Ragara is especially mad at him.” Dog leered at that. “But soon enough they'll learn you're awake too, and then your time will be up. If Angel wakes up, she'll get the same treatment.”

“That's okay,” replied Dog. “I'd rather be first anyway.”

“Losing your patience? Has he been wearing off on you?” Hail asked, trying to be light hearted.

“No,” Dog answered. “I can't watch. I've already told them I can't do it.”

Hail couldn't say anything to that. He walked over to Dog and clasped his hand in silence. We stayed like that for a while. Sometime later I fell asleep.

Sometime later I awoke to voices. I cracked my eyes, and saw Hail standing at the barred door, talking through the grate. He was pleading with someone. I recognized the voice as Ragara's.

“My lord,” Hail was saying. “I need to check her injuries, and I can't if I can't move her body. Please, let me have the keys. I need to examine her.”

“No. Not now, not ever. She's going to rot in those manacles until I drag her by the hair to the gallows, and even then I'll bind her hands,” he retorted.

“She's going to die long before that if I can't treat her,” Hail begged. “She's bleeding internally. If I don't take care of her, she won't make it to the gallows.”

“Then she'll die just like that!” Ragara exclaimed. “It's no better then she deserves.”

“But it's better then the gallows. Don't you want to see her on trial? Everyone in town already knows what happened. Do you want the whole city to know you only managed to try one of the culprits, when you caught all three?” Hail, I noticed, left me out of the conversation entirely.

“Then I'll hang them when they're dead!” snapped the Dynast. Suddenly, I noticed why I hadn't immediately recognized his voice. Somehow, he'd developed a slight speech impediment. He couldn't pronounce hard consonants quite as well. It took an act of will not to snicker.

“And what would that prove? The Immaculate Precepts clearly dictate that the dead should be consigned to the earth,” Hail pointed out.

“The Immaculate Precepts dictate I can do whatever I want!” Ragara retorted.

“Please, great one, don't you want to show the peasantry that you're better than them? That you ignored their feeble insults as truly beneath your dignity?”

“I'll show them that I won! That if they cross me, they die in prison or kicking from a rope,” came the refusal. “And you may well join them at the gallows, instead of just in here to tend their injuries. Your words are getting quite close to insolence.”

“Please, forgive me, sire,” Hail responded contritely. “I mean no offense. I am simply a healer and want to tend my patients, as is my station in life.”

“Then your station is to watch them die. I am finished,” he snapped. His booted footsteps tromped off, and the steps of his escort followed him. Hail watched from the door, and then sighed when they were gone. His shoulders slumped.

“You all right?” I asked.

“I’m fine. Better than you, I might add,” he replied, attempting a smile. He walked over to me, and checked my bandages.

“Listen, you don’t have to pander to that selfish brat,” I told him. “He’s not going to change, so don’t give him an inch.”

“That’s just pride talking,” Hail replied. “Respect costs nothing, and if I could get the keys so I could properly examine her, I’ll bow to whoever I have to. It means nothing to me.”

“It’s unnatural for anyone to be that self contained,” I told him.

“Not nearly as unnatural as your desperate aspiration to throw your life away,” Hail countered.

“Touche,” I answered.

“She wouldn’t want you to do that,” he continued. “She felt horrible when she had to break your heart, and she kept telling me of girls she’d met that she wondered if I would set you up with. I wouldn’t, of course, because I knew that would just make things worse for you.”

“Thank you,” I told him. “I don’t think I could have taken that.”

“I know. She did too but didn’t know what else to do. She asked me once what I would have done if she had gone the other way.”

“What did you say?” I asked, curiously.

“Been real unhappy,” he replied with a dry smile.

“Amen to that,” I agreed with just as wry an expression.

He gave me some more water, and we sat quietly. I lost myself in recollection of good times in the village of Highmere, and simple days where mastering a new kata had been the my greatest problem. My master, who I had never called any other name than that, had taught me an empty handed form and myriad exercises. Many motions relied on unusual hand motions that trapped my opponent. I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to use the style. My wrist throbbed, but it was healing.

It was a long night. Sleeping is hard when you’re shackled to the bed, and wooden planks aren’t comfortable in the best circumstances. Hail made pillows for us as he could, sacrificing his jacket for it, and wrapping Angel in his cloak. The rest of us slept in the cold and didn’t complain.

Sometime later she croaked hoarsely, asking for water. Hail rushed to her side with the bowl and managed to help her drink some. When he asked her how she felt, her response didn’t make any sense.

From there she rambled for a bit, her words getting weaker until she lapsed unconscious again. She kept breathing. We took what comfort we could from that.

“Hail, I know you'll do the right thing,” I said, once the three of us were awake. “So please don't take this the wrong way. Would you help us escape if we could?”

“Don't ask stupid questions,” he retorted.

“Stupid because the answer is yes, or no?” I asked.

Hail sighed, wearily. “Ending, if there were any way to get you out of here, I would do it without hesitation. Regardless of the consequences.”

“Do you think you could get me out of the shackles if you broke my legs and arms?” I asked.

He stared at me in silence. I couldn't make out his expression in the dark cell. “Even if I did, you're still shackled in by the neck.”

“I thought so. I was just wondering,” I replied.

“Dog, do you have any ideas?” Hail asked him.

“Not really. Maheka won't help us. We're only worth anything to him because this doesn't matter to him. Shogg can do little outside his forest, and we can't contact him from here anyway. If Hail went, he might not be able to talk to him, and might not be able to return if he did. Nor do we have any mortal friends who might be willing to undertake a jail break. Anvil might, but he'd never risk his family, and I wouldn't want him to. He's done enough all ready.” Dog clearly had thought this through. “Frozen Thane doesn't know us. I was wondering if there was some way we could persuade Defile Perilous that we knew something she needed, so she'd get us out of here, but I doubt she would cross Ragara for it. Ragara is intent of us getting dead here. I thought about Ragara's wife, but couldn't find any leverage there either.

“As to the bonds, they're probably Ragara's steel, and while not perfect, are well beyond any skill of mine. Maybe if we had a file or clasp or something, but I noticed the water bowl is wood, as is the bucket. With a month and a tool, I might be able to work through the plank of the table, but somehow I doubt we have that much time. Speaking of which, Hail, do you know-”

“Tomorrow,” he replied evenly.

“Ah. I see.” Dog went silent, digesting that.

“Though they haven't given a time for you or Angel,” Hail told me. “You'll have two or three days once they find out you're awake. Angel probably won't make it to trial.” He spoke very calmly, as if he was discussing the weather or the politics of a distant nation.

“How is she?” I asked, before Dog could say anything. He shouldn't have to deal with this before his execution.

“The bleeding won't stop. It's slow, but since I can't get food in her, and she barely drinks, it's fast

enough.”

“Any hope?” Dog asked, pitifully.

“There's always hope,” Hail told him.

“Would you put money on her?” Dog asked, discarding Hail's optimism.

“Dog, I'll put every dinar I ever own on her.”

“That wasn't what I meant,” Dog observed, but he smiled in spite of his words.

“That's because you meant something stupid.”

“Your bedside manner straight sucks,” I told him. “I don't know if I've mentioned that, but for the medic of the group, you've missed some pretty common medicinal training.”

Hail chuckled. “Sorry. I'm only mortal.”

“Being mortal sucks,” concluded Dog.

“Don't worry. We'll use our mortality to lure Ragara into a false sense of security,” I decided.

Dog and Hail looked at me across the darkened cell. I couldn't look back at them because the shackles on my neck kept me staring at the ceiling, but I nodded solemnly in agreement with myself.

“Well, I certainly think they've fallen for that,” Hail observed.

“This guy's plans are amazing,” Dog told him.

“So that's what you're calling it,” Hail responded.

The chains on the lock outside the door rattled. With a squeal of poorly oiled hinges, the door swung inwards. Hail bolted to his feet, startled. Dog and I tried to work ourselves around so we could see who it was.

It was many. They came one after another wearing ornate lacquer plate armor. Crested plumes brushed the dirty stone ceiling. One after another they marched in to line the walls like a parade ground. Nearly a dozen stood at attention within our small cell, and four more took positions around Dog's table. Already shabby, the guard who followed them in looked like a cave rat. He fawned over the man who followed him. If I had an angle, I would have spat over his head at the object of his obsequious concern.

“Good morning, Fuzzy Puppy.” Ragara Aino greeted him with vitriol disguised as aplomb. “And you too, Hail. Or is there an absurd monicker for you as well? Burrowing bunny? Insubordinate Insect? Or are you still maintaining your innocence, that you attend to these vermin solely from a sense of duty?”

“Is there any injustice in attending to the sick?” Hail asked softly.

“There is a pointlessness in it,” Ragara responded acidly.

“Compassion is never pointless,” Hail corrected him. His demeanor was submissive when Ragara looked for an excuse to condemn him.

“Insubordinate Insect you may be. Do not let your compassion take you to the gallows with your patients, lest you hang as well to keep them company,” the Dynast threatened him. The grace and tact he had carried himself with when we'd interrupted his breakfast was gone. Now he snarled his words, keeping his voice low. If he hoped that hiding his lisp in such a way concealed his lisp he was mistaken. It merely drew attention to it. “Bring that one.” He pointed at Dog.

Our jailer set to work on the shackles with a wrench. It seemed we hadn't been locked in but bolted. Finally Dog was free. Ragara's guards put him on his feet, then knocked him down and stomped on his head for a while. Ragara watched dispassionately. “You know, of all of them I think you're the bravest one. You're certainly the smartest. The girl's too dumb to realize she's out matched. I don't know who she is, or why she's in a vile peaceful place like this. But she's killed people, so many of them she lost sight of the fact that I'm not people. The other one's just crazy. He's living in a fantasy world. But you actually knew what you were doing, and the odds of it. And you kept on doing it anyway. Fuzzy Puppy, or who ever you are, that leaves you as the only one without an excuse. So I'm going to put you through a worse hell than the others. You're going to watch them die.”

Guards pulled Dog to his knees. He stared up at Ragara, who smiled down in exquisite hatred.

“Your revenge is letting me live?” Dog asked. His voice was elated, appearing inadvertently so. Dog would never lie that awkwardly.

“Yes.” Ragara smirked. “It's something my wife taught me. Dragon's in the details, you know.”

It was time for my personal brand of charm. “Would you stop lisping and talk like a man, burnt lizard? I'm trying to sleep here.”

Ragara froze. His entire body clenched, and he paused looking at Dog.

“Now tell me something,” I went on. I put limitless venom into my words, a gift I'd had. Somehow, I always could really irritate people when I wanted to. “What's worse? A dynast with no sense of gratitude to a man who helps him with his product, or a dynast who can't talk, because another man, a worm, a maggot, punched his jaw crooked?”

Now the guards froze. Several of them had been cocking fists to resume wailing on Dog, but they stared up at their boss immobile. Everyone did, wondering how he'd react.

“Personally, I think if someone doesn't have his honor, he's-”

“Searing Fist Attack!” screamed the enraged Ragara Aino. He twisted and swept his hand in a burning, overhead blow that smashed into my gut, splattering fire and blood in all directions. He hit me so hard the table underneath me shattered to smoldering flinders, and I hit the stone below like a bag of cooked meat.

Ragara panted, desperately trying to regain some of his poise. I wasn't sure if I was dead or not until the

pain hit me.

“Now, did you have anything else to say?” the Immaculate Martial Artist replied, scrabbling at the edges of his self control.

I did. I called him the last thing Hail had called me, the profanity so vile I honestly didn't understand what it meant. Apparently Ragara did. He turned the color of ash.

If Ragara was going to do his worst to the one he hated the most, I intended to be certain that was me. Besides, Dog didn't have the spite in him to endure what I would.

The cell was utterly silent. No one spoke.

“Take them to my estate,” Ragara said very softly, indicating us.

From the floor I looked over at my companion as the guards lifted him to his feet without another word or strike. For a brief moment we understood each other. I winked.

“Bring the healer,” Ragara said over his shoulder as he departed. “As well as the sick one. I have designs for them.”

I turn to the guard to say something cocky, but he forestalled that with his fist to my head.

In my dream I watched my body being carried through the passageways. We left a large building marked with the scales and measures of justice, and went through the grimy streets of Nibeldamt to Ragara's mansion. The east side of it was still beautiful, the only building untouched by soot in the city. It's west side was charred naked timbers against the sky. Seared to the ground by the fire the gardens were burned stumps of wood and cracked stone. Scaffolding was already going up around the manor house, scabbing over the wounded spots. I looked around, wondering why I had come here in a dream, when the four of us were carried past a figure in white and blue. She was known to me.

“Have you avenged me?” Ash Maiden asked.

“No. I don't have the power,” I admitted.

She looked at me coldly in the dream. “If you really loved me, you wouldn't have failed.”

That threw me into the waking world drenched in sweat. Smiths were pounding red hot bolts into the manacle on my right wrist, preparing to seal it to an iron rack I lay across. It was decorated in spikes and had chambers to hold hot coals. I gasped once, grabbed the red hot metal with both hands, and stabbed upwards into a face. He shrieked and jerked back, while his buddy startled, and loosened his hold in his shock. That was what I needed.

Breaking free of his hand, I kicked him in the throat and rolled off the rack. My landing drove the air from my lungs, and informed me why I wasn't bound. All of my ribs were broken, my internal organs were shattered, and I bled from everywhere. But I had no time for infirmity. I found the wellspring of spite, bile and fury that gushed limitlessly in the hole where my soul should have been and drank deeply. At the back of my heart was power that offered me the ability to warp fate like I so desperately wanted. I clutched it tightly.

The guards gasped, and cried for aid when I rose to my feet in the guttering glow of forge fire. Smoke and sulfur filled the underground cell. There were four of them, and one of me.

“Run,” I ordered them in a low tone.

They fled.

I looked at my hands. They were branded from the iron, and bled slightly. But they were ready. I went to Angel, where she lay on an iron grate, and ripped the shackles from her body.

“Wake. It is time,” I bade the sleeper.

Gasping as I had, she bolted upright and staggered. Shaking her head cleared it of the cobwebs of unconsciousness and injury. She faced me, and I pointed at Clockwork Dog. Together we tore his bonds apart, rending steel with our bare hands. The balefire in the forge began roaring, sucking air hungrily through the bellows and tearing shrieking breaths through the vents that lead upwards through the ceiling. We could have escaped through them, had that meant anything.

Angel lifted Dog to his feet and held him there. He took a shuddering breath, and then seemed to collapse, catching himself on his own legs at the last moment. I turned and watched him. My eyes seemed to burn, and leak tears of opalescent fires that dribbled up to my brow. It was happening to all of us. Our eyes, our hands, our faces all began to radiate brilliant light, white in total but each beam burned the world with unique color.

Hail yanked open the cell door to stop, astonished, in the threshold. The three of us turned to face him, steadily building in intensity at the center of our individual fires. His mouth dropped open. Behind him we heard the sound of dozens of voices, and the tramp of jack boots.

“Weapons,” demanded Angel.

Dog stepped beside her, and held his empty hand curled as if about a scabbard. She grabbed empty air before him and drew a glowing saber of incandescent light from nothingness. Her expression was ecstatic, like a question she'd been pondering all her life was suddenly answered. When she walked it was like a dancer, so light on her feet she seemed to float, as she moved to Hail and the oncoming fight beyond him. As they stood shoulder to shoulder she paused and looked him in the eyes.

“I have always loved you,” she told him with utter confidence. Then she moved past him, and her radiance was the sun come to visit a tunnel.

“Weapon?” asked Dog of me.

“I do not need them,” I replied.

“Then I go to help her,” he informed me, and moved after her. He too paused in the doorway to address Hail. “You are a good man. Make her happy and the Sun will bless you.” Then he was gone, drawing blades from his own radiance.

Finally Hail turned to face me. Of the three of us my glow was the slightest. His eyes were filled with

tears. I stood beside him, and placed a companionable hand on his shoulder. “You have done right by the Ash Maiden. Your restraint is admirable. But it is time now to lay aside that form and join us. Are you ready?”

“No,” he replied honestly.

“Tough,” I replied and punched the mortality out of him. Then I turned my back and strode down the tunnel, looking for a fight.

It wasn't hard to find. Angel wielded her saber like she had been born with it in her hand. It cut through steel like butter. She slaughtered her way upstream against the tide of Ragara's personal army, smashing through weapons and shields. Bodies crashed into walls in pieces. Knives flew over her head and shoulders, lanced under her weapon and slid into the empty places between great man-killing strokes. As she forged ahead, Dog dropped death before her, and walked along behind, snatching his throwing knives from the dead as they went. Their brilliant anima's glowed white and blue, flickering chaotically through shapes. It was quicksilver madness against the tide of armored mortals.

By the time I'd caught up with them, they were moving at a trot up stairs. They had run out of enemies, allowing us to make better time. Soon we ascended to the ground floor. We came out a oak doorway into an antechamber that Dog and I had raced through before. Beneath hanging tapestries dozens of soldiers were arrayed against us, pikes leveled. Above us, looking down from a landing, Ragara Aino stood beside a regal looking woman. He wore red mail, and blades were sheathed at his side. She wore a flowing gown of sea foam green, intricately embroidered like waves crashing against the shore.

“The Ice Walker. She killed one of us. Give us her location, and we will leave in peace,” I told him.

“It is too late for that, Anathema,” Ragara replied. To his warrior fanatics he called, “Kill them, and live as heroes in the Immaculate Faith!”

The hammer of his army hit the anvil of our Angel. Dog harried them like a plague. I bounded upwards, set my feet against a rippling banner that swayed in the wind of the fury below, and raced upwards like it was a broad platform. Ragara met me at the railing, and we came together like the wrath of old gods.

For years my master had taught me simple forms. They had seemed partially chaotic, with movements following each other like the random gyrations of leaves in the grip of a strong current. I'd learned how one thing would follow another, but had never understood why. Now it was obvious. The why had been flows of an unseen and unconscious power whose elusiveness before was betrayed by its undeniable simplicity now. Later I would come to learn this power was referred to as Essence, but in the hallways of the mansion I simply understood that elbow strikes followed kicks because that was the most effective way to augment them by that power. I knew why Brilliant Void had changed the footwork when he mimicked my form on the roof of the tower of ancient Jaggerfall. I knew how he had known.

But my newfound understanding of myself showed me underlying patterns in Ragara, that came to him fluidly while I struggled. He was very good, much better than he had shown when we'd fought the first time, and that time he'd crushed all three of us casually. Now he was armed, armored, and holding nothing back.

He cut the railing to ribbons, set the stone burning with his follow up stroke, and gouged furrows in the floor as I hurled over his head, sprinting up a hanging bell pull and leaping over the final screaming

slice and the dovetails of fire that burned in its wake. I landed behind him, and took a donkey kick directly to the chest. It threw me into a flip, and I spun through the air before alighting onto the feathery tail of a quill pen, tucked into the inkpot of a desk. Ragara turned to face me, and I smirked at him. It seemed the most infuriating thing to do.

Ragara smashed the desk to blazing splinters. I stood my ground on the feather as it wafted downwards, flinging backhands at his head. Essence made my hands stronger than before, filling the veins with iron. He swayed backwards to let a pillar take the impacts of my fist, shattering it to dust. His retaliation was dual, scissoring strikes that he was completely not prepared for me to grab out of the air with my bare hands. Oh, it hurt, but that was mostly due to the red heat of the blades from the power that arced through them. The Dynastic scion stared at me perplexed. I leaped forward and smashed my knee into his face.

From there I drove him back. He landed on his back, and barely rolled away from my blazing fist. Screaming, I punched holes in the floor as I chased him across his balcony until he could leap to his feet and attempt a riposte. I was having none of that, blocked the blades, kicked his feet out from under him, and punted him into the air. As he sailed backwards, I leaped onto his cloak and dashed up his blazing garment until I stood on his chest and did violence upon him. His arc described a beautiful trajectory over the balcony rail and into the open space of the atrium. Angel and Dog held their own against the Dynast's bodyguards below. We destroyed the wall we hit, slid to the floor, and the roof groaned as I wailed on him with elbows and knees.

“Stop!” shrieked the magnificently regaled woman, his wife I presumed. She perched by the hole in the railing I didn't remember making. If there was any power in her voice, it fell from us like rainwater. Yet her soldiers fought consumed by fanaticism, and did not heed her words. Angel and Dog retaliated in kind.

“She said hold!” cried a new voice, deeper and louder than Ragara Peleps Anara, for it was indeed she. Hail had emerged from the stairway to the basement, and stood in radiance upon the landing behind us. His brilliant aura of gold and saffron swept around him like wings or the mantle of a lord's cloak. In his voice there was power, like a gilt fist, that smashed into the participants in the melee and forced us to listen to him. His attitude commanded respect. Tentatively, weapons were lowered. The mad three of us did as well, stopping the carnage.

“Spare my husband. I will give you whatever ransom you demand,” she told Hail.

He looked up at her, no less commanding for standing below her feet. “We have no desire to kill him. We want to know who killed a companion of ours, Ash Maiden, and what role he played in that.”

I disagreed with the first half of that but with Angel nearby and already in the mood for violence, chose to hold my peace.

“What makes you think he played any role in that at all?” rebutted Ragara Anara. Instead of answering, Hail turned to me and raised an eyebrow. I had released Ragara and stepped away from him that his burning anima wouldn't sear my flesh. It had died down somewhat, and now, though it scored my clothing and degraded the walls, it didn't hurt me.

I crouched down next to him. Ragara was somewhat unaware of what was going on, a result of my knees meeting his head so many times. I snapped my fingers in front of his face until he focused his

attention on me.

“Who. Killed. Ash. Maiden?” I broke each word down to an individual sentence. There was no chance he would misunderstand me.

“It wasn't me,” he replied, slurring his words even worse than before.

“Was it the northwoman? The one known as Defile Perilous?” I asked.

“I don't know,” he denied. He might have been holding signs with 'Falsehood' written in stars.

An idea occurred to me. “Did she kill Serenading Thrush?”

“No,” he replied.

“He's lying,” interjected Dog.

“Yes, dear. We know,” added Angel pacifying.

“About everything?” I asked Dog.

“Just about Serenading Thrush. The first thing was a half truth. He doesn't know who killed Ash Maiden, but has suspicions. Isn't that right, Ragara?”

“No,” the fallen martial artist denied.

Dog looked up at me and shrugged. “That was a complete lie.”

“Did you tell her to kill Ash Maiden?” I asked.

“No,” Ragara replied.

We all glanced over at Dog. He nodded his head slowly. “That's true.”

“Where is she now?”

“The dead one?” he asked. I couldn't tell if he was being snide, or the concussions were getting to him.

“The murderer,” I clarified, carefully keeping my sudden anger under control.

“Don't know. Hunting Frozen Thane most likely. That's what she does with all her free time,” Ragara explained.

“What do you know about Frozen Thane?” Angel asked.

“Nothing. Just that he has bad choice in enemies,” the Dynast replied.

We all looked at Clockwork Dog. He shrugged, and then nodded his agreement.

“Very well then, madam,” concluded Hail to the woman on the balcony. “It seems our business here is done. You will stop all pursuit of us, and we won't have to repeat this performance. Agreed?”

“Very well,” she replied.

“Thank you,” Hail answered, and without a backwards glance lead the way outside. Angel followed him, and Dog followed Angel. I let Ragara sink back onto the floor, then threw a sweeping bow to her, him, and the armed men who watched us depart.

“And have a wonderful day!” I exclaimed brightly, in a tone calculated to infuriate them. Then I hastened after the others. It's amazing how cathartic that fight had been.

I caught up with them outside. The morning sun enveloped us like a long lost friend. It made me whistle with joy. Hail looked at me and asked, “Was that really necessary?” of my parting remark.

“Absolutely. It was the polite thing to do,” I told him haughtily. He groaned, and cradled his head with his hand. “Listen. This is my mad quest for revenge. We do things my way. And if we aren't going to punish that bastard for imprisoning us, torturing us, and worse, we're at least not going to be civil about it.”

“I thought you only cared about revenge? Why all the side drama?” Hail asked.

“It's my own personal brand of charm,” I explained.

“What's the next move?” Angel asked, cutting us off before we could start bickering.

“We find Defile Perilous, and find out if she killed Ash Maiden. If she did, we end her.” I replied evenly.

“If not?” Dog asked.

“We kill her anyway. She sounds like she deserves it. We just kill someone else too,” I responded.

The other three looked at me oddly.

“We can finally stop tiptoeing around this damn town and get to business!” I explained. “No more asking questions, no more negotiating from a position of weakness. No more losing fights. We do this hard and fast, and let nothing stop us. Ash Maiden befriended Frozen Thane. Defile Perilous wants to kill him. That's enough for me. We kick ass, and take names, and then kick those named asses too. Now come on!” Since I didn't feel like continuing this discussion I took of running at that point. The others had to jog to keep up with me, as we raced through the dirty streets of Nibeldamt.

Our prison clothes had been gray, but now they were bleached white, and resembled the funeral garments we'd first come to the city wearing. We still radiated light, pouring out a blinding incandescence like before. Yet now our animas weren't changing sporadically. They were settling down into iconic figures that rose behind, fading as time when by but still visible. Dog had a man in robes, who held scales, a scythe, a measure, or hourglass in his hands. The icons flickered and changed, but were slowing down.

Angel had a celestial host above her, winged Valkyries that bore swords in one hand and cornucopias in another. Sometimes they were grim and terrible, and other times they were joyous. They flew above her, and had mimicked her motions in the fighting before. Every strike and parry had been mirrored by the horde's attacks.

Hail's anima was the most placid. It covered him like ceremonial robes, shrouding him in ancient finery of a style that tugged at the hackles of my memory. Behind him was a mandala of some religious significance that seemed familiar to me in an unplaceable way. All of us had glowing sigils on our foreheads, with some repetition of a circle. It was obvious somehow that the sigil was the most important thing of all, but I didn't know what they meant. I filed them away for later.

My path through the city wasn't aimless. I cut across byroads until we stood before the empty house of Serenading Thrush. We ignored the people who stopped and stared at us on the sidewalks and street corners and went straight in. There was no point in attempting to be secretive now. It had been almost a week since he'd died. The furniture was slowly disappearing. Window panes migrated to neighboring houses. We went upstairs to the bedroom, where the strong box lay open and discarded. Its contents were gone.

“Whoever did it had to come here to frame us,” I explained. “And they left carrying lots of money. We find their trail and follow it.”

“You do know the trail is a week old,” Hail observed.

“I never said it would be easy,” I countered.

“Down!” shrieked Angel, tackling Hail about the knees while scissoring my legs out from under me. I toppled backwards, as in a timeless moment a flight of arrows burning with jade fire tore through the plaster walls, ripping through the spaces where we had been, and shredding my tattered clothing. Broadheaded arrows passed so close to my eyes that I could see the individual stitching in the fletching. They sank two hands deep into the interior beams, quivering like ringing tuning forks, before writhing and taking root. Finally I hit the ground.

“What the-” Dog started yelling.

“Beast of the Oak Forest,” snapped Angel. “Far row of houses, roof, green tunic turned gray with soot. Powerbow, boar hunting arrows.”

“Oh,” replied Dog, deflated. He huddled behind the overturned desk, while the rest of us scurried across the floor for what cover we could find.

“Dog, take him out,” ordered Angel.

“What?” he asked, confused.

Angel was behind the shattered bed, broken from our first entrance to this room. She crouched and leaped to the desk. A single burning green bolt tore through the wall towards her, but she was spinning and smacked it with her bare palm. The corona flashed and crackled, but the bolt smashed into the ceiling. Angel landed on her side, still rolling, and crashed onto Dog, sprawling across his back protectively. Her hand was bleeding.

“Far row of houses. Fourth unit from the end, it has two chimneys. He's behind the chimney on the left side,” Angel told him. There was a deep thwack, and a broadhead sheered off one of the oaken beams of the desk. Angel ignored it. “He's wearing a green tunic, like when we first saw him, but it's been turned gray by the falling ash. You need to take him out.”

Dog wanted to complain. He wanted to argue about things like range, attacking blind, and exposing himself to a sniper to counterattack. But Angel lay across his body, shielding him with herself, and her face was touching his. If he turned his head quickly to the side, he would have kissed her. Her soft auburn hair was intertwined with his black stubble. Dog's brain wasn't working.

“Green tunic. Chimney on the left,” she repeated.

An arrow sheered through the desk, passing through oak like mist. It lanced across Angel's shoulders, laying open a thin path of white skin with a line of seeping blood.

Dog grabbed her, rolled over until she was almost beneath him, and then hurling himself backwards and up, sailing into the beams of sunlight from the lone window. Snatching blades from plumes of green fire still wafting to the ceiling and sunlight, Dog flung knives out the window. Some passed nicely through the shattered glass, and some tore holes in the wall around it. Cascades of cutting terror filled the small window, the sky beyond, and ripped the chimney Beast of the Oak Forest sheltered behind to brick dust. Others went for the hunter, and he disappeared over the edge of the roof.

Hail and I caught Dog as he landed, and yanked him behind the fireplace. No one moved, waiting for a counterattack that didn't come.

“Did you get him?” asked Angel.

“I don't know. It was a good throw.”

Glass shattered, tinkling like bells as it hit the ground. A single blazing arrow shot through the window and curved around the desk, shot over the bed, and lanced Dog's chest. As soon as it hit it burst into thorns and spines that shredded his skin and cut to the bone. He screamed out once, and my world went white.

I ignored the window and went through the wall. The two story fall was nothing. A brilliant green arrow shot straight up from behind a row of cheap houses, made a hard right turn in mid-air, and raced over my head. Hopefully, Angel would see that coming. I sprinted across the street and went through the front door of the first house I found without opening it. My passage through the started family's abode was punctuated by the shattering of walls as they got in my way, and I exploded from the back side in a rainfall of brick and mortar. Beast of the Oak Forest was readying another shot, pointing his bow straight up towards the sun. His head snapped down as I appeared, throwing white dovetails of Essence in all directions.

“Ah, shit,” he gasped and whipped the bow around towards me. He loosed his shot as I got to him. The arrow tripled in number by the time it left the bow, hitting me in the chest, torso, and one leg. It flipped me sideways and spun me through the air, but I never lost hold of his jade powerbow, even as the power of his anima scorched my hand. He went for his quiver, and I went for him. My hands got to his face first.

I smashed the back of his head against a rock, then again, and then once more until he gasped in pain and lost his hold on the bow. A knee took the breath from his body and then I knelt on his chest, ready to beat him to death with my hands. Angel screamed 'stop' behind me.

“He can save him!” she shrieked, trying to get through the fog that covered my mind.

“What? Who?”

“Dog isn't dead, but he's dying. The arrow punctured one of his lungs. It might have hit his heart. But that bastard can save him,” Angel gasped, emerging from the hole I'd made in the building. “Dog told me to get the Wood Aspect. That must be this one.”

“You know healing magic?” I asked him. My voice grew soft because the strain of talking instead of killing was so great my lungs were having a hard time working. My heartbeat drummed 'murder' on my brain. One by one I snapped the arrow shafts off at skin level.

“Yes!” pleaded the Beast of the Oak Forest, gurgling the word because there was barely any air left in his lungs.

I grabbed him by the throat, heaved him over my shoulder, and stalked back through the house. My fingers kept involuntarily clenching, closing his windpipe, as I went. Angel had her hand on my shoulder, telling me that I had to let this one live. Her words were white noise that barely entered my consciousness.

Dog was in bad shape. His chest wasn't rising and falling evenly. The shaft was still lodged in the side of his chest, and blood was seeping down his shirt. Hail was working on him, cutting away his shirt and trying to get to the wound with panicked haste. It was speed born of despair. He knew there was nothing he could do but couldn't bear to do nothing. I dumped the Terrestrial in a pile at Dog's feet.

“Fix him,” I grunted.

He opened his mouth to argue or negotiate, but stopped when he saw my eyes. Shapes weren't making sense to me. Light seemed to come from things instead of the sky. I saw the Beast's fear, and the knowledge of how close he was to an unspeakable death preying on his mind. Angel was talking, saying something about how we might let him live. I couldn't even figure out what language that was because the words made sense, but the sentences didn't. The Beast went to the injured Dog.

The tracker and Hail cut the arrow from Dog's chest, and deep red almost purple blood flowed from the wound. I could see down the hole in my friend's rib cage, and could see the weak beating of his heart, punctured on the side and pumping less blood through than spreading around. It seemed such a small and terrified organ to be driving Dog's life. Then the tracker's hands glowed white, and the bleeding stopped. Tissues reknit themselves as I watched. Sinew leaped from bone to bone, and fibers knit themselves under the skin. Sweat started pouring down Dog's face. Nerve fibers branched and spread, and were sheathed in flesh. He gasped and then started breathing easier.

I stared at Dog. He had an amazing bruise on his chest, larger than a dinner plate. The scar was smaller than expected, but it was gnarly shades of purple and white. But Dog was breathing. He sounded like he'd just run a marathon, but labored wasn't injured.

“He should be fine in a few days,” offered the Beast, hoping that somehow he might get out of this alive. “If I tended to him, I could make sure that infection doesn't set in. There's a lot of blood inside-”

“Shut up,” I snapped. “Clockwork Dog, it's on you. May I kill him?”

Dog looked at the mountain man, then sighed. “What good would that do? Let's make him useful, first.” The other two exchanged a curious glance and waited. Dog continued after catching his breath. “Hail, you said the trail would be cold, right? And here we have a Dragon-Blooded tracker; the best money could hire. There's no point in wasting him, right?”

Understanding sank in. Hail smiled and nodded his head in relief. Angel just smirked, and let herself be overjoyed that another of our friends hadn't just died. I sighed, because I wanted to kill the bastard so bad I could taste coppery murder. Still, we took Dog along because he was always right. This would be a bad time to fix something that wasn't broken.

“Find the trail, dead man walking,” I told the tracker as Hail and Angel helped Dog upright. He was unsteady on his feet, needing one hand on a wall for balance. While he was getting his balance, the grimy tracker hunted around for spoor. It took him a while. He went so far as to sniff the ground, lick the strong box, and peer under everything.

“Falling soot has obscured much. Even if it hasn't, the trail is very nearly too old to be found. But only very nearly,” he hastily assured me. “Shall we go then?”

“Are you sure I can't kill him?” I asked Dog.

“Very. We haven't let you kill anybody yet, and don't intend to let you start,” he informed me.

“I've noticed that,” I muttered. We set out downstairs and left the house, moving up the street heading north. Our course paralleled the river. People still watched us from their houses, but our anima's were muted now. Mine was all but invisible, though I wasn't entirely sure what it looked like. That was annoying. Our route took us uphill, away from the foundries. Once the habitations of man dropped away, our route swung beside the river, and followed it. Steadily heading upstream, away from the direction the three of us had fled almost a week ago, the trail was moving straight and sure.

“Another bit of evidence we weren't the killers,” Dog observed to the tracker. “This is the opposite direction from which we went. And, there were three of us, while you refer to the trail singularly.”

“Whatever you say,” the tracker agreed appeasingly.

“Listen,” said Angel. “We aren't going to kill you. Not unless you betray us or attack us.”

“It's not you I'm worried about,” responded the captive.

“We're not going to let him kill you. In fact, we're not going to let him kill anyone,” Hail supplied. “That's more or less why I'm here.”

“That's why all three of us are here,” Angel agreed.

“You know, I'm perfectly capable of doing what has to be done,” I pointed out.

“We know that. Trust me, doubt in your ability has never been the issue. That's the problem. We're worried you'll like it too much,” Dog explained.

“I'm going to kill whoever murdered Ash Maiden,” I stated flatly.

“Only if you get to him first,” Angel countered.