

Act 4

We were riding a high wave of confidence after our victories over Ragara Aino as well as the Beast of the Oak Forest. In addition Dog was healing even faster than we expected. He went to sleep the night after we left Nibeldamt and woke up fine. That was it. He had no soreness, no bruising, nothing. Angel and Hail clustered over him as I cooked breakfast, poking at his chest, constantly looking up waiting for expected hisses of pain. Dog shrugged.

“It doesn't hurt at all?” Hail asked, confused.

“Not a bit.”

“You're healthy? Really?” added Angel.

“Better than before,” Dog replied, smiling bashfully. He looked a little embarrassed at the way Angel kept touching him, which I thought was hilarious.

“Well, Beast of the Oak Forest, you've proved you are worth your word, at least,” I told the tracker. He and I were setting the results of his hunt over the campfire. During the night, accompanied by Hail, he had gone out and returned with two rabbits and a variety of edible plants. We weren't intending to stay long enough to prepare them well, but I was doing what I could. Our campsite was in a small grove of brambles that had engulfed several small trees. No one could see in, and by building the fire near the base of an ash tree, the smoke rose and dissipated through its leaves, spread to fine to be seen. Eventually my companions got tired of poking Dog and joined us.

“So, feeling froggy?” I asked Dog once they'd returned.

“Ready for anything,” he agreed, which would shortly be proved to be a complete lie.

I'm telling you this because I want you to understand how optimistic we were at that point. Life was good. We were in a cozy den sheltered by old hardwoods. This would last roughly nine seconds.

“So, when's breakfast ready?” Hail asked. “It smells delicious.”

“Was that a compliment?” I needled him.

“Just serve, you-”

The ground exploded.

A hillock on the north side of the site that we'd used as a wind break came violently from together. Huge boulders ripped through the camp, nearly braining Angel. Tree roots snapped like kindling and flailed through the air, one catching Hail in the head. He lost consciousness. Directly underneath the fire pit, a ground blast tore the frying pan from my hand and cast me backwards into one of our harboring trees. My head met bark like a thunderball. The eruption had thrown Dog into the air, and now he was sailing over the treetops into the distance.

Standing in the northern crater stood a figure nine feet tall. It was covered in coarse fur over skin that

looked like old leather. Barefoot, if such a term was meaningful, its toes were knurled as tree roots. From torso to toe and shoulder to wrist its underlying bone and musculature looked human. It, or rather he, for he was both naked and immensely, visibly male, was built like the colloquial brick shit house. The head and hands were those of a southern lion. Its mane expanded from the immense neck and flowed over the shoulders to mid chest. With prehensile paws for hands, each possessing unnaturally large blood red claws, its humanity seemed to merge smoothly with impossible nature. The whole being was speckled with intricate patterns in flowing white light that moved just beneath the skin. They accented his form, blazing from chakrah to chakrah, expanding the channels of his bodily energy from rivers to ocean currents.

Its companion made no such half measures. It was a bird with lightning for feathers, eyes the color of deep sky, and wings like typhoons. It had emerged from beneath the ground, but now hovered in air, wings wafting slightly on nonexistent winds, while lightning bolts reached from body to tree and seared air and earth. If the tattoos on the lion were oceanic passages, on the thunderbird they were starry galaxies that raged above a nighttime sky of storms and chaos. Between the two, their simple arrival had knocked three of our party senseless before a blow had been thrown.

“I am the Fall of Angels, and you have one heartbeat to stand down and put on some goddamn pants before I end you,” said the sole standing member of our group. She stood alone and unarmed at the center of the clearing, looking defenseless and mundane. (The Beast of the Oak Forest had demonstrated his own good sense by yelping, “Fuck!” and running away as soon as our visitors had appeared.)

“Little girl, do not make me hurt you,” growled the deep voice of the lion headed man. Its companion had taken flight after the Beast, and now screamed through the trees to the sound of thunder roaring from trunk to trunk. The echoes ripped leaves from stems, bark from trunks, and cast dirt from the ground. Its passage filled the air with the smell of ozone.

“One,” counted Angel.

The interloper didn't waste more breath by speaking. My girl had that look in her eyes, the one that portended calamity like a fall of angels. Still, our attacker was bigger, stronger, and vastly more powerful. He had no idea Angel was just meaner.

They came together like natural forces bent on mutual annihilation. Suicidal migrations of the fire-beasts of southern deserts into the fast flowing river of Id were of similar intensity, but result in superheated clouds of steam ripping apart the river's banks, forming the voracious essence-powered storms of lightning and hail that give birth to the next generation of fire-beasts. The fight that took place in our campsite had no such reproductive necessity to justify its fury. Born and bred warriors bent on ending the engagement via destruction, they managed to capture the sound and fury of natural cataclysms. The lion attacked fast, seeking to overwhelm her quickly with his size and speed. Angel grabbed a rock, shrieked, “All Things Are Blades Approach!” and began whipping the blunt stone through the air in the fluid patterns of the Silken Lotus Style of the warrior-fanatics of Gnesh.

Being at best semi-conscious, I could appreciate Angel's technique with the calmness born of a serious concussion. Her take on things like feints and parries was unique. To Angel, a feint as a lethal stroke easier to parry than necessary, thrown in such a way that blocking it left one open for the invariable onslaught of follow up attacks. She thought parrying meant breaking your attacker's arm before his strike got home. Given that in her hands stones severed flesh and bone while a birch rod shrieked

through the air and gouged furrows in oak trunks, her unique approach to combat ripped fur from skin like rainfall. She cut the lion's biceps off, excoriated his chest till naked ribs shone in the sunlight, and severed his forearm from his body save only ribbons of tendon and sinew before beating him with it.

Her primary problem was that the lion got better. He jammed his forearm back into place and flesh leaped from his arm to forearm dovetailing streamers of essence to reinvigorate the limb. His claws were quicksilver talons of white light and power that could block the horrific, unrelenting cascade of Angel's assault, cutting down the number of times she tagged him to a third. While on a mortal that third of strikes would all be fatal, the lion just took them and kept coming. He launched flurry after flurry of his own, using his absurd reach advantage to harry Angel around the campsite, never letting her disengage for positional advantage. She couldn't evade every attack which meant she had to block or dodge, something that resulted in exhausting her while the lion's mangled limbs reknit before my eyes.

Through my foggy brain, the thought that I should do something about this began to arise. My motor system considered it, and concluded that was impossible, as any non-reflexive action was an unacceptable instruction to my muscles. I asked myself what was injured, and the response was, 'Everything.'

The lion, who was growing frustrated, blocked another nigh insane torrent of lethal strikes, made no less dangerous by the fact that Angel's current weapon were handfuls of water she hurled from a canteen. Each splash lanced through tree trunks and holed rocks. "Peace, woman!" he bellowed. "I'm trying to take you alive!"

"Too bad. I'm not," snapped Angel. She leaped at him, swinging the empty canteen overhead in a two handed arc and cried, "Volcano Disrupts the Countryside Cataclysm!" before smashing it down towards the lion's exposed chest.

The big cat wisely decided not to take it like a man. "Perfect Evasion!" he cried, and suddenly, simply wasn't there when Angel's murderous smash whiffed past him. She hit the ground and a sun's worth of power blasted out from the impact site, vanishing into the earth. The lion darted forward, put his claws together, and came down at Angel's head with a double handed strike. He caught her cleanly on the base of skull and drove her head into the dirt with a sharp crack.

Angel lost consciousness almost immediately. But she did have time to smirk and whisper, "I figured you'd do that," before losing consciousness.

"Oh, poop," breathed the lion.

The energy Angel had thrown into the ground had traveled deep, bouncing off the geomantic lines of power that flowed through the bones of the earth and returned, magnified a hundredfold by the soul of Creation itself. Like magma breaching the surface, the ground under her enemy erupted in molten rock and fire, throwing him into the sky as it sheared earth and stone. The geyser of essence should have ripped his flesh to pieces and fried the pieces to ash, but those of the lion's kind are not so easily killed, even by geological phenomena. He clung to life and consciousness as he tumbled into the sky, and realized that even with his power, there was no way he was going to survive hitting the earth again. That was why he had brought a friend with him.

"Falcon! Help!" he screamed, and his words passed through the high open air of the mountain to where

the thunderbird tore through woods and ravines after the Beast of the Oak Forest. I'm not entirely sure how the Dragon-Blood had evaded him so long. Later on I concluded that the tracker was simply much brighter than the rest of us, and had made sure he could run really fast from anything he couldn't kill. Regardless, the thunderbird heard the call, and abandoned his chase in a blast of ozone and the crackle of static. Shearing through the tree tops, the bird flashed across the sky. It could move much faster in the open sky than juking between tree trunks and crossed to the falling lion before he could have his sudden, splattering reunion with the ground. Catching him in moonsilver tattooed talons, the bird dropped and avoided the open pit of lava that waited below.

The lion dropped to the ground of the clearing just about the time I was getting feeling back and Hail was gurgling. Angel was lying still, breathing softly with her face buried in the ground, but still very much alive. The lion considered the lot of us, and looked into the face of the prospect of fighting more, who might very well be as capable as the girl. We weren't, of course, but the lion didn't intend to take that chance. He pounced on Hail, and hollered something about subdual, before beating him unconscious. Maybe he beat him unconsciouser, as I'm totally clear what Hail's state at the time was. Regardless, Hail wasn't doing anything, and my turn was next. My cranial trauma graduated to the next level, and I took a nap.

Of circumstances become a connoisseur of being beaten unconscious, I would like to grade the headache I had upon waking as a six out of ten. Splitting internal pain mixed nicely with numerous external bumps and abrasions, but lost points for not being potent enough to white out my vision or leave my ears ringing. Also, since I was out long enough for my spine to remember how to work, I had feeling in my fingers and toes upon waking to, which put me slightly better than I was upon going down. Excellent effort but underwhelming results, I decided.

I was hanging from a tree branch, trussed hand and foot like a hog to be taken to market. Twisting I could see Hail and Angel, but not Dog. They were in a state similar to mine. The woods around us were dark and deep. Clearly we'd been carried some distance while asleep. Now we were in deeper woods of the east, and the trees showed it in greater girth and deeper color. Sunlight only faintly made it through the canopy above.

"That one's awake," grunted the lion man. He'd put on pants, thank you heaven, and was watching us from nearby. He'd taken a seat against the vast bore of an old oak, and rested comfortably with roots for armrests. His tattoos gleamed with their own luminescence in the twilight of the forest. Near him crouched an attractive black haired woman in a blue and green smock. She was similarly tattooed, and wore a headdress of long, brilliant white feathers. They were as pure as clouds. Her skin and eyes were darkly tanned like those who live all their days outdoors.

"Is that the one that almost beat you?" she asked. Her voice was demure and so polite it almost concealed the amusement. She didn't look much past her late teens.

"No. It was the woman," her companion grunted.

"Oh, right. I forgot. You were beaten by a hundred pound girl."

"A hundred pound girl who hit me with a volcano," the huge man snapped.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't be so sexist," she suggested.

“Maybe you should shut up.”

“Children,” snapped Hail. “If you've going to capture and interrogate us, try to be mature. It's more intimidating that way.”

The two squabbling figures froze. They hadn't realized Hail was awake but quickly got their surprise under control.

“We aren't going to interrogate you,” said the girl. “We're just holding you so you can't harm anyone.”

“Very nice of you,” I told her. “Not terribly bright, but very civilly minded. Let me guess. You're working for Ragara Aino and are waiting for him to arrive hand us over?”

“No!” exclaimed the male.

“Shsst!” hissed the female. “Don't tell them anything.”

“Don't be embarrassed,” urged Hail. “You're doing a very respectable, if misguided, thing.”

“Ragara Aino is a very charismatic man,” I agreed with him. “It's easy to see why you'd like him.”

The girl sniffed and ignored us. Without a word exchanged, Hail and I agreed to a subterfuge.

“Well,” mentioned Hail to me. “I don't think he's really that charismatic at all. In fact, he's kind of a-”

“Don't say that about him!” I interrupted. “He's a fine and upstanding man; a Dynastic scion of the Blessed Isle.”

“But he's a jerk!” exclaimed Hail.

“Got that right,” muttered the lion. His female companion clearly wanted to correct him for speaking, but couldn't disagree with anything Hail said.

“But he's handsome, at least. Had I his looks, I would be irresistible to women,” I opined, loftily.

“You would be easily resistible to women with Ragara's looks and the Scarlet Empress's money,” interjected Angel groggily. She didn't need prompting to play along. Our captors snickered.

“Woman, you wound me,” I retorted. “What if I had Ragara's charisma as well?” I asked the girl. She scoffed but remained silent.

“You've already got his charisma,” Hail told me. “You're a jerk.”

“Had you Ragara's looks, the Empress's money, and far more charisma than you do, you still wouldn't have a chance with her,” Angel informed me, beginning to get into her role. The teen was nodding in agreement. “She's into me, after all,” concluded Angel. The raven-haired girl froze.

“I am not!” she snapped.

“You are?” I whined at her. “Kitten, you get all the ladies,” I lamented loudly.

“I know,” gloated the giant, cockily. Hail burst out laughing.

“He was talking to me, my muscle-bound acquaintance,” corrected Angel. “Besides, your lady friend is clearly more interested in me than you.”

“I am not!” the woman in question reiterated.

“See? I told you,” smirked the lion-headed giant.

“Grah!” she growled and waved her hands in the air.

“You're good,” Hail complimented him.

“Oh, I know.”

“How do you make sure she resists the Dynast?” Hail asked.

“Oh please,” snapped the woman. “Even if I ever did meet Ragara, which I won't, all his charm wouldn't do anything.”

“Because you like me,” Angel agreed with her.

“It's okay,” Hail reassured the girl without a trace of mirth in his voice. “She's very pretty.”

“I do not like her!” the girl snapped, getting angry and argumentative. “I just don't like musclebound idiots like him.” The last was with a nod at the still lounging giant.

“What's wrong with liking women?” I asked. “I like them quite a bit.”

“But women don't like you,” Angel told me.

“I like him!” yelled the girl out of pure contrariness.

“And I like you,” I encouraged her.

“Why him and not me?” asked Hail, with an injured tone.

“We didn't capture you to expand the dating pool!” snapped the big man. He was suddenly uncharacteristically irritated.

“Of course not. You did it to turn us over Ragara Aino,” supplied Angel. “Unless we have all this backwards, and you're attracted to them instead of me like she is?”

“Well, at least someone likes me,” mused Hail, philosophically.

With the girl arguing her heterosexuality out of sheer contrariness, it was not had to get the man into a similar position. “I'm not, she isn't, and we aren't giving you to Ragara either!” he snapped, getting

defensive, goaded by Hail's honeyed tongue.

“My mistake,” murmured Hail, appeasingly.

“Very,” grumbled the lion.

“But we can't start dating yet,” I told our female captor apologetically. “I don't even know your name.”

“See?” Hail encouraged the big guy. “You still have a chance.”

“I've never not had a chance!” the big guy retorted. “You're just a captive.”

“Ouch. No wonder you like women, with the only men around like that,” mused Angel.

“I don't like women, and I don't like him!” the girl argued, getting angrier. She jumped to her feet and took several steps away from the lion headed man, towards me. “It's a pleasure to kidnap you. My name is Sky Eyed Vixen.”

“I've never enjoyed being kidnapped more,” I assured her. “I am called Fluffy Bunny by my enemies and the Ending by my friends.” We tried to shake hands but had problems given as I was hog tied and all.

“You, sir, are a player,” Hail mock admired me. He turned his head towards the lion. “Look at that stud. Bound hand and foot, and still gets your woman. Unfair, isn't it?”

“He does not have my woman!” the lion snarled.

“Don't worry, honey. I kind of like you,” Angel told him. “Provided you keep wearing pants.”

“Tell me, the Ending,” asked Sky Eyed Vixen, “What does Ragara Aino call you, since you seem to know him so well?”

“Mostly obscenities,” I admitted truthfully. “But when he's being civil, he's firmly in the Fluffy Bunny camp. That's why I hope you aren't going to give us to Ragara.”

“That's the one thing Seven Roaring Terrors has correct,” she told me. “We aren't. If you weren't servants of Defile Perilous, we'd leave you alone, but as things stand, we can't let you kill Frozen Thane.”

I nearly choked at that one. Angel did as well, and a sudden silence threatened the clearing. Seeing the talkative mood he'd worked hard to create fading, Hail asked the lion-headed one, “Seven Roaring Terrors? Tell me, did you name yourself that?”

“What if I did?” asked the giant. “What's wrong with it?” He got up and strolled over to the rest of us, refusing to be left out of the discussion.

“Nothing,” Hail replied, in a tone that insinuated the opposite. By now the three of us had our captors right where we wanted them. They would argue anything if we took the opposite stance. I wanted to bring up the seasons just to see if I could get one to claim winter followed summer.

“I like it,” said Angel, taking the hint. “It's a strong name.”

“See?” the lion defensively exclaimed.

“It's too strong,” said Hail. “It's the type of name someone gives himself. See, where we're from, when one reaches adulthood, one is given a new name by the village elder. It prohibits people from naming themselves, otherwise bakers with overdeveloped senses of drama wind up named Darkstalker Ravenheart of Blood.”

“Not that there's anything wrong with Seven Roaring Terrors,” argued Angel. “So long as he keeps his damn pants on.”

“See?” I observed to Sky Eyed Vixen. “She's obsessed with him not wearing pants.”

“She does seem to fixate on it,” the girl replied amused.

“I knew it,” the big man agreed, once again conceited.

“My point is,” explained Hail. “You're already a big man. You don't need a name that says that for you. One doesn't name a tyrant beast 'Gigantor.' One names it something like 'Tiny' or 'Nibbles' for the irony. You're what, nine feet tall? Anyone with half a brain can figure out you're a terror. Seven of them is pushing it, though.”

“He's got a point,” admitted Angel. “You might want to change it to something less ostentatious. Maybe something that flatters you brains.”

“Which might be hard, because he isn't too bright,” I murmured to Vixen in an undertone. She snickered appreciatively. The big guy heard, of course.

“Listen you-” snapped Seven Roaring Terrors.

“Don't say that about him!” interjected Angel, before anyone could beat some sense into me. She didn't have time to wait that long. “He's smart enough to defeat me!”

“He did that because he's big and strong and too dumb to know when he was beaten!” I argued with her.

“That's true,” admitted Angel.

“Hey!” screamed the big guy, now feeling betrayed as well as insulted. “I figured out you three are working for the northwoman!”

“See?” Hail told Angel. “He did. Tell her how,” Hail encouraged him.

“Simple. You've been working for her all along. Shogg promised her he'd help her find FrozenThane, but wanted her to take Ragara down a peg in return,” Seven Roaring Terrors explained.

“Because Ragara beat Shogg, and made him his servant,” agreed Hail, continuing to side with him.

“But Defile Perilous wasn't going to put her own neck out, so she had you three do it for her. And now you're tracking down Frozen Thane for her,” the huge man concluded.

“Which we aren't going to let you do,” the girl told me apologetically. “We like Frozen Thane.”

“Never met him myself,” I told her. “But I hear he's quite charming.”

“Well, honestly he's almost as much of a jackass as Ragara Aino,” she told me. “But he's helping us figure out how to rescue one of our own.”

“Tell me, children,” interrupted a new voice. “Would you like to spill any other secrets?”

In unison our two captors suddenly realized how much they'd told us and exchanged chagrined looks. Emerging from the shadows was a black panther. It strolled into the clearing with the supreme self confidence of a great cat and regarded us. Other than talking, it appeared completely normal if in amazing condition. Its coat was glossy black to the point of being immaculate. Blazing yellow eyes stood out as points of fire in the shadows of the deep woods. Once it had a commanding perch on a hillock it regarded the lot of us sagely. Normally my weirdness meter would peg at this, but normal had been left long ago. The two children settled into abashed silence.

“Now, prisoners, I commend you on doing a remarkable job of pulling confidential information out of two of my more reliable students. You've taught them a valuable lesson in watching their tongues, and all life should be a learning experience,” the jungle cat told us.

“Did we just not get insulted?” I asked Hail.

“I think so,” he told me.

“Wow. It's such an odd feeling,” opined Angel.

“But your manners are lacking,” it continued.

“We are bound hand and foot,” Angel observed.

“This is true,” acknowledged the elderly cat. I began to realize that the cat was much older than he appeared. Also probably not a cat, what with the whole talking thing. “Sky Eyed Vixen, please let your boyfriend down. Seven Roaring Terrors, cut down your girlfriend.”

“And me?” asked Hail.

“Someone will get around to you,” assured the cat. “Now, answer me truthfully. Are you working with Defile Perilous?”

“No,” I said as the embarrassed young woman untied the knots and assisted me to my feet. “Though she may have manipulated us for her own ends,” I admitted truthfully.

“Do you mean Frozen Thane any harm?” the cat continued.

“No,” Angel assured him. The lion headed giant supported her with one hand while making short work of the rope with his claws. Soon she was on the ground beside me, chapping her wrists to get feeling back.

“What would you do now, if let free?”

“Find Defile Perilous, ask her if she killed Ash Maiden, and kill her if she says yes,” Hail said. Without instruction, the two students set to work letting him free. Soon he was down as well, standing beside us.

“A worthy choice. She is chasing the northman some nine miles north of here. Shogg is aiding her, and in the forest he very capable. I wish you good luck. You will need it.”

With that the old cat hopped down and strode towards the woods. The other two fell in behind him.

The three of us exchanged glances. “That's it?” asked Angel.

“Was there something else?” asked the cat, over one shoulder.

“No, I guess not,” admitted Hail.

“Very well. Nine miles is a quite a distance. There's a mountain in the way, you know. Were I you, I would hurry.” With that the cat and his students vanished into the woods.

“What the bloody hell-” I began, when Clockwork Dog burst from the tree line. He was bruised, bedraggled, and exhausted. Stumbling to the three of us gasping and sucking wind, Dog looked like distilled crap.

“Hi. I just- Are you-” he hacked out around deep breaths. He was panting so hard he was almost hyperventilating.

“Take your time,” Hail told him.

“Put your hands behind your head. It'll open your lungs, and help you catch your wind faster,” Angel encouraged him.

Dog did so, and after a few minutes managed to get himself under control.

“Sorry. I've been running since they took you,” he explained.

“How did you find us?” Angel asked, curiously.

He looked at her with the inscrutable expression from Ragara's dungeon. “I can find you anywhere. Trust me.”

“I'll take your word for it,” Angel replied.

“Well, I've got good news, and bad news,” I told him. “The good news is Defile Perilous is nine miles to the north, chasing Frozen Thane.”

“The bad news?” Dog queried.

“They're nine miles to the north. There's a mountain in the way. We're going to run,” supplied Hail.

“Nine miles. North. Over a mountain,” Dog repeated, just to be sure he heard that right.

“Yep,” I confirmed for him.

“Right.” He groaned, leaned back to stretch out his abs, and twisted a few times, working out the inks in his back. “Well, let's get started then, shall we?”

We grinned at him. “All right, then.” I said.

“Which way is north?” asked Hail.

“That way. The way I just came,” supplied Dog.

“The mountain?” asked Angel.

“It sucks,” replied Dog.

“Nine miles?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Dog replied.

I patted him on the back, trying to be both apologetic and companionable. He laughed a little, but shrugged and set off at a trot. We fell in behind him and traveled.

That run broke me off. We stopped at the few streams we passed to rest, drinking deeply of the sweet mountain water while we did. By the time we'd left the company of our captors, daylight was waning in the early afternoon, leaving us on a timetable. We had to move quickly. At first we let Dog set the pace, since we expected him to be tired. Two miles later and several thousand feet higher, we forced him to stop so the rest of us could catch our breath.

“I keep forgetting you're not a small, bookish kid,” Hail admitted after plunging his face into a shallow pool. He was speaking to Dog, who paced around the clearing, keeping his muscles warm.

“I am a small, bookish kid,” Dog countered. “I'm just poor, have no books, and like to run. While you're getting your wind back, mind explaining to me what happened during your absence?”

Angel did most of the talking. She broke the chain of events down quickly, omitting most of the technical details of the fight. Dog did ask, “You let him knock you out intentionally?” at one point in her tale.

Angel shrugged. “It seemed reasonable at the time,” was the only explanation she offered. After that Hail took over the narrative of our capture and reverse interrogation. They agreed that the panther had

probably let it go on exactly as long as he wanted. The coincidence that he had left with his students in tow just as Dog arrived was too unlikely to be unintentional. Similarly to Maheka, the jungle cat had set the situation so he would gain if we succeeded, but lose nothing if we failed. On the other hand, that implied our feline friend was at least nominally on our side. Still, we resolved to trust him not at all. Paranoia was setting in.

"I'm impressed you managed to get them to fall for the crossfire," Dog told us while we were trotting along a game trail.

"They didn't," replied Hail cryptically. After some prompting he explained, "The girl, Sky Eyed Vixen, was buying it, but the man was ignoring us. I had to force him to start talking."

"You forced him?" probed Dog.

Hail spent several moments looking for words. We were all scrabbling for vocabulary to describe our powers. "Do you remember how you threw those knives at Beast of the Oak Forest? You didn't just throw them, you threw them better?"

"Yes," agreed Dog in a tone that encouraged Hail to continue.

"Well, I did the same thing. I put power behind my words. Normally I think Seven Roaring Terrors would just have ignored us when we started trying to eek a reaction out of him. But he didn't when I made my words-" he stopped, and tried to figure out how to explain it. "-more."

"When I was living in the Imperial City, I once heard Dragon-Blooded warriors talking of 'Charms.'" Dog reminisced. We all grew silent, surprised he was willingly breaking his silence on his history. "At the time I didn't understand what they meant. They talked about them like they were tricks, little moves they've figured out which let them go past the normal limits. I think that's what we're doing."

"I noticed that too," I agreed. "There were things my old sensei taught me to do but never explained why. When I would ask, he just told me that it was part of the form. But up until now, I've never been able to make the tricks work. Now, they seem easy. The secret to them, the 'trick' I was looking for, makes sense now."

"Are these tricks, Charms, magic?" Hail asked.

"No," replied Dog thoughtfully. "They're close, but I don't think they're the same."

"So, how long did you live in the Imperial City?" asked Angel, losing the fight against her curiosity.

"Oh, look. The sun's setting. We should pick up the pace," observed Dog. He immediately sped up until we couldn't afford to waste any breath on speaking. I momentarily hated Angel but soon lost the energy for that too.

After that we ran hard. The mountain did indeed suck. By nightfall we were crossing terrain we'd already passed, and sheltered for the evening in a small glade, near where wild lilies grew in waterfall pools. I tried to take watch but succumbed to sleep in the end.

My dreams were simple, like what I'd had before. Ash Maiden was alive when I slept. Every time I

woke she died. If my body didn't require it, I would never close my eyes.

Angel was watching me curiously when I dragged myself from my blankets. Without a word she fell in next to me on the way down to the stream. While we'd agreed that no one should go off alone for safety's sake, I knew that wasn't what this was about.

"You don't sleep very well, do you?" she asked while washing her face in the river.

Perched against a tree with my back to her, I was watching the woods for signs of an impending assault. She had all the privacy I could give, but it also gave me an excuse to hide my reaction. My dreams weren't a good topic of conversation.

"I thought we agreed not to talk about this?" I asked.

"So that's why you didn't want to wait in Shogg's woods. You're scared of sleeping," Angel surmised.

"Again, this isn't something we need to discuss," I told her.

"I'm not sure of that. Have you considered your bad dreams might not be because of simple guilt? We've dealt with a lot of people with more than human abilities, including us. Someone could well be influencing you." Angel told me over the noises of splashing water.

"I don't have to stay here for this, you know. I'm about to leave," I threatened.

"No, you can't. I'm giving myself a bath, so you have to make sure no one looks at me while I'm naked."

"What if I look at you while you're naked?" I countered.

"Please. You'd need to admit to yourself there are girls other than Ash Maiden in the world, and I'm pretty sure that part of your brain is broken. Both of you are like that," she observed acidly.

"Both of who?"

"You and Hail. You know how impossible it is to try to win a guy who's in love with a dead girl, much less my best friend? I can't even really try, because I feel like I'm dishonoring her memory." It suddenly occurred to me that Angel's acidity wasn't directed at me, but at herself. After her admission at the moment we'd come to our power, she'd never spoken a word to Hail. I was an idiot for not noticing that before.

"Have you talked to Hail about it?" I asked.

"No," she admitted.

"Why not?"

"Scared."

I almost turned around to stare at her. This was the girl who let herself get beaten unconscious to hit a

giant cat with a volcano. “Of Hail?”

“Of him telling me 'no.' Ending, I already know he doesn't feel the same way for me. If I push the issue, he'll just have to reject me. Maybe in a little while when time's taken the edge of his grief we can discuss it. In the mean time I know what he would tell me, and I'm scared of hearing it,” Angel explained simply. Her words sounded practiced, giving the impression she'd rehearsed this speech on herself many times. “I wish I'd never had said anything to begin with.”

“Then why did you?” I asked. “I mean, when we escaped from jail. Why mention it then?”

“Because that was when I first got power,” she explained. “This, this, whatever this is. I'll ask Dog what it's called. He'd know. But I didn't realize how it worked. I thought I was immune to everything, but now I realize there's no gift that would let him reject me without making me want to cry.” She was silent for a moment, and the pool was still. The only noises were birds in the trees, and water cascading down the falls. “Besides, if something happens, at least he'll know.”

“Nothing's going to happen to you,” I retorted, bothered she would even imply otherwise. “You're the biggest badass we've got.”

“We'll see,” she replied.

“Have you thought about anyone else?” I asked, hoping to distract her.

“How can you even ask me that?” she whispered. Her voice sounded betrayed. “You, of all people.”

“Touche,” I admitted. “I'm sorry. That was inconsiderate of me.”

“Jerk,” Angel grumbled in a hurt tone. I heard more splashing noises. “Besides, I'm not here to talk about me. I'm here to ask you about your dreams.”

“Sorry, but this might be a wasted trip for you. I don't want to talk about them.”

“Well, tough. We're talking about something while I bathe, since I can't do this with either of the other two.”

“Why not?”

“I'd be embarrassed to be naked around either of them. But if I could get you to pull your head out of your butt long enough to even think about another girl, I'd feel like it was a worthy sacrifice.”

Angel was not given to tact or mincing words, I'd noticed.

“Shouldn't you have feminine modesty or something?” I opined.

“I have plenty. That's why you're looking at the woods, instead of at me.”

“No, I'm looking at the woods because I'm worried someone might try to kill you while you're naked.”

“Don't quibble. Tell me about your dreams, Ending.” I was going to lose this. I could never beat Angel

in a battle of wills.

“Dammit woman. In my dreams she's alive. She's with me, not him. When I wake up, she's dead. I couldn't even let her tell me it was over without making her cry. Fun memories. It's not complicated. What do you want from me?” I snapped, staring angrily at the trees.

“You know, that's not your fault,” Angel said quietly.

“Yes, it is, and you may as well admit it,” I sighed, and realized I couldn't avoid explaining this. “You know why she didn't love me? It's because I'm a hair shy of being ax crazy, and there's nothing I can do about it. Look at how we took it. Hail mourned her and did what she would have wanted. I'm trying to get my friends killed while I go find someone to murder. You know why she didn't love me? Because of that. I can't even blame her for it. Now can we please not talk about this any more?”

Angel finished getting dressed while I ranted, and by the time I wasn't snarling any more came up behind me. She wrapped me in a sisterly hug, and I could feel her wet hair against my back. I ignored her until everything was safely bottled up again.

“Ending, Ash Maiden found the meaning of her name in death. Please don't do the same,” she whispered softly.

“We'll see,” I muttered, throwing her words back in her face.

“You're a pigheaded ass, you know that?” she told me.

“Doesn't anyone in this group know what a bedside manner is?” I asked her rhetorically.

“Dog does,” Angel informed me. “At least ask him about your dreams, will you?”

“Do you promise to drop the topic?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, then. I'll talk to Dog about my dreams. I'll talk to the whole world about my dreams, my bad habits, and what I had for lunch yesterday if you just stop pestering me,” I ranted to the world.

“Good.” She gave me a parting squeeze and stood up. “Let's go back to the others.”

“Hold on.” I didn't bother taking off my clothes. Instead I just jumped into the pool, scrubbed myself with sand, and rang out everything I was wearing when I got out. After that we went back to the campsite.

While we were gone, Dog and Hail had foraged successfully, and we came back to a collection of fruits, berries, tubers, and plant stems. We ate. Angel caught my eye, then sent a meaningful look at Dog and grunted at me. I sighed.

“Have either of you been having weird dreams?” I asked, skirting around the issue.

Hail thought about it, then shrugged. “I dream of Ash Maiden a lot. The way she moved, what her

cooking smelled like, that sort of thing. They're sweet dreams, but they make waking up hard sometimes.”

I mulled over that while asking Dog, “What about you?”

“My dreams are always pretty strange. I try not to pay too much attention to them,” he replied.

“Strange how?” I asked.

“Last night my dead grandmother attacked me with a frozen weasel, and I had to beat her to death with the melody from *Little Blue Baby*,” he answered, referring to an old lullaby. “By the time I got her down, a flower grew out of her forehead and blossomed into the Scarlet Empress, whom offered me a cupcake. The cupcake was full of octopi who immediately began eating Nexus. After that my legs turned into the color green. Then I woke up.”

We all stared at him. Dog shrugged. “Like I said, my dreams are pretty weird. They're just dreams though.”

I turned to look at Angel, asking her with a glance if she was satisfied. She put a tired hand to her forehead, and waved submissively.

“Why?” asked Hail, observing our interplay.

“Nothing at all,” I replied evenly.

“Well, if you girls are done whispering, I suggest you head up to the ridge line and look towards Nibeldamt,” Dog told us.

“Why?” I asked.

“It has begun,” he said simply. “Now, I'm going to go wash off.”

With that the two of them went down to the stream. Angel and I picked our way up the hill until we hit a high spur that carried us to open air. The sweep of heaven was undisturbed by the few nosy peaks that reached for it, trying to see what went on behind the vault of the sky. Ecstatic birds flew below us, winding their way through the vales of the Meander mountains. We stared at the world, laid bare at our feet by the naked power that made mountains. For a long time we just looked. Then slowly our attention swung to the city.

Nibeldamt was framed by two great peaks. They had once been joined by a soaring kol, but centuries ago an earthquake had sheared that apart. Now their shoulder's reach for each other, ending in cliffs that bookended a view of the foundry city. It was under its usual cloud of ash. The gloom that had been so pervasive while we were there seemed tiny, bottled in by the surrounding peaks. As we watched, the smokestacks of First Age iron foundry gouted flames into the sky. The city was an unnatural mechanical beast. But as we looked, we became aware that the fires ripping through the city were not solely confined to the foundries. They ripped through the city, burning some of the lesser mansions and a garrison on the north side.

“Maheka's making his move,” Angel observed. “He must have decided we'd weakened Ragara's forces

enough.”

“He would never have done that if Ragara himself was still fine,” I said.

“Then he must not be,” Angel replied.

We considered the aftereffects of our actions that now plunged the city into fighting. We couldn't see individual figures, but knew they were moving from street to street, clearing patches of Ragara's resistance. The people loyal to him would be driven from their homes. Only the continued outbreak of dirty red flames confirmed that it wasn't complete already. We watched the city burn for a long time.

“Man. The animal that kills itself,” observed a new voice. We glanced around and saw her. Between two standing stones in the shadows of the morning sun stood a woman in elegant stillness. Angel and I didn't need to exchange a look to know we both recognized her. Though having only seen her briefly, I never forget a face. (Or a prostitute for that matter, but that was part of my old life, like larceny.) Underneath her elegant formal wear, Serenading Thrush's hooker was as pale as her northern skies. She regarded the distant violence with dispassion. Her hand rested lightly on the silk wrapped handle of a long broad blade hanging from her belt.

“Ants,” countered Angel. “They make war. They'll conduct genocide if they can.”

“So the murder is part of the natural order? I feel vaguely absolved,” the woman replied.

“Defile Perilous?” I presumed.

“Indeed. Let me guess. Fluffy Bunny?” she replied, amused. I smiled.

“Cuddly Kitten,” Angel introduced herself.

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

For a moment Defile Perilous stared at me, like she was debating lying. Finally she shrugged. “Yes. I did. Shall we make this a formal duel, then?” asked the Icewalker.

“No. We're just going to hack you to pieces,” I replied.

She looked at us bemused. “I forget how direct you manlings can be. It's quite refreshing after Yu Shan.”

Hail shot her in the head. Three feet of fury behind an armor piercing needle cast from a bow of light and fire dropped on her from behind, perfectly matching the incident angle of the morning sun. The bow had no string to vibrate or wood to creak, and the fletching on the arrow was pure essence that made not a whistle as it cut the air. Defile Perilous had no warning at all. She still parried. After that she glowed a soft verdant green for a split second before the time to notice such details was over.

Angel and I screamed like lunatics as we blitzed her. Our cries were intended to distract her even as Dog and Hail filled the air with their second volley. Hail's fingers flew from quiver to bowstring with unhesitating speed, hurling arrows until it seemed the the sky was falling upon her. Every shot missed. Dog threw so many knives that they occluded the sky worse than a plague of locusts, and came down

on Defile Perilous like rain in a winter storm. She parried with her sheath. Angel whipped the cloth belt from her waist and snapped it outright, where it held its rigid shape and sang like a nightingale as it cut the air. The woman severed it with an effortless draw of her blade. If Angel's improvised weapon sang like a bird, the murderess's sang like an opera star. I just screamed louder and tried to punch her in the boob. That did not go well for me.

Needless to say, she blocked. With a flick of her wrist, she drew the weapon along my forearm until it leaped to my chest and laid me open to the ribcage. Freakishly, that hurt more more than it should have. In addition I went tumbling backwards down a bluff, bleeding everywhere to crash to a halt against a rock. Swearing, I grabbed my chest and squeezed it closed, willing the wound to stop bleeding until I could go beat that woman to death with my hands. It did. Two steps got me into a sprint and I leaped back up the bluff, sailed a dozen yards past a scree field, and landed back in the fight, flowing fluidly into the motions of my old master. Defile Perilous was before me. For some reason there were bears everywhere.

They were big ones too. Ten to twelve foot grizzlies roared and swatted at Angel. Each one was about half a ton of muscle and claws, furious as a rabid dog, and I noticed upon further observation, attacking in infantry tactics of the Su-Hon barabrians. Admittedly, the Su-Hon used little more than berserk rages and numbers, so perhaps it was a coincidence. Then again, given that I'd returned to find several tons worth of rabid grizzlies had managed to sneak up on us, and berserk rage was quite the effective tactic for them, perhaps not.

The one immediately before me bellowed as it swatted at my head. I stepped forward, blocked to the inside, and punched it in the guts with all my strength. I gave it the extra effort. My fist smashed into its hide and sent shockwaves through its fur before flinging twelve hundred pounds of pissed off bear off the other side of the mountain. I juked under the next claw, darted up the back of one distracted by my sword-goddess, and leaped after Defile Perilous, glowing like the sun.

She pivoted to block my foot with her sword, even as her hands glowed brilliant crimson that flashed up the blade. Wild fire red streamed behind her weapon as it describe an artistic arc, whipping around to my head. This time I was ready for it and caught the blade between my palms. Like Hail had described, I put power into catching the weapon. For a moment transfixed on the tip of her weapon, with my feet dangling above the ground, she seemed perplexed by this until she whipped the blade around again and beat me against the ground.

This was distracting her from Hail's hail of arrows, which would have been the point were I thinking clearly. She weaved back and forth among them, taking cover behind her ursine shock troops and letting them absorb the leaf headed stings. Finally getting her weapon out of my capturing hands, she turned to attack Angel who was cutting a swath towards her. I staggered upright to interfere, but a brown bear batted my head downwards, compressing my spine and blinding me while the blood pooled at the top of my head. A thrown meat cleaver the size of a barge oar took it in the head then, and I regained my wits long enough to punt it over backwards. The bear back flipped and crashed into one of his comrades. Angel had seized one of the kodiaks by the guts, had managed to get it airborne in the most staggering O-goshi hip toss ever, and was parrying Defile Perilous's terrible counter attack with the thick, ursine skull.

Implacably the swordswoman fainted once and went for Angel's knees, trying to slip her vast singing blade under the baffled bear where it's huge bulk would conceal the strike. I interrupted by leaping at her back, shrieking something about coiling dragons, and latched onto her shoulders. When a grizzly

behind me smashed me into the ground, I took her with me. We ate dirt together.

Angel flung the kodiak she had a handle on away and snatched one of Dog's flying knives from the air. It was one of the few he was hurling that wasn't formed of solid shadows and light. Defile Perilous performed a shoulder toss on me that was simply impossible given position and leverage, but nonetheless delivered me to the furious offices of an enraged *ursus majoris*. It had an open injury on its belly that looked remarkably like my fist. I think it remembered me.

The bear snatched my leg from the air with its teeth as I went by. That really stung. But it also put its head in a still position. Dumping enough essence into my elbow to raise atlantis, I smashed my forearm into its snout, cutting the bear's jaws in half. I dropped to the ground with teeth still in my leg while the baffled grizzly tried to figure out why it couldn't feel its face any more. The opening provided a perfect avenue past its thick skull for my fist. As the thing toppled and its head turned to a fine pink mist, I tried to figure out what was happening to Angel.

The ladies were going toe-to-toe with reckless abandon. Unfortunately, my girl was losing, and the horde was blocking my avenue to her. Fortunately, Dog stopped his onslaught on the bitch long enough to sling a flurry of knives my way. They were broad and slow spinning, providing a perfect series of aerial stairs I darted up, hurled over the shaggy heads, and came down all knees and elbows on my lesser favorite of the girls. She didn't have time to parry my body with the pointy parts of her sword and merely smashed me from the sky with the pommel. Still, that finally distracted her enough for Angel to use the techniques of "Rock to Face" style martial arts. One of the older styles, many people don't have the respect for it that it warrants, especially considering Angel could cut glass with a dull pebble, and the one she was using outweighed me.

Defile Perilous went down hard a second time. The side of her face had been laid open to the bones of her skull. Were it not for the sudden rush of her bears we would have finished it then, but they overwhelmed us, forcing us back. For the first we noticed that bear carcasses lay everywhere with arrows sticking out of their eyes and nostrils, mute testimony to Hail's efforts. More of them kept coming, rushing around rocks that could barely conceal a bird. There seemed an infinite supply, which was quite likely if Shogg the Forest God was bending his effort to it. We had no idea the extent of his power. That being said, we were prepared to deal with a nigh limitless supply of targets on our way to finishing the fight.

"Ending, get me a weapon!" snapped Angel as the tidal wave of fur tried to overwhelm her. She wasn't quite as mobile as me, lacking my penchant for acrobatic nonsense. Currently engaged by five great shaggy beasts she was holding them at bay, but couldn't direct enough attention to any one to finish it. I got pincerd by two mammoth kodiaks, roaring to deafen the heavens. Dodging claws, I bounded off the immense girth of one, spring boarded from the snout of another, and danced across the heads of the furious horde.

"Weapons!" I shrieked into the distance. Hail must have heard me for his fusillade stopped for the first time. It took several stomps to get a faction of the terrorizing bears enraged with me, and then I lead them towards Angel. Still bellowing they swarmed over their own comrades in pursuit, breaking up the unified assault on Angel. Out of the chaotic maelstrom of bears she leaped, unharmed, and glowing like the war goddesses of heresy.

"I still need a weapon," she snapped as we went for Defile Perilous over shaggy heads, forsaking the ground entirely.

“Coming!” called Dog.

We glanced right. At first we thought he was flying, until noticing that the wiry little man was riding two of Hail's arrows and clutching a third for balance. With whatever bow Hail was using he'd shot Dog at us in our moment of need. I caught him and carried him along, for his feet hadn't learned the trick of ignoring the ground. But as our target got her feet under her and climbed upright through shock and anger, Angel grabbed Dog's open hand and clawed a blinding saber of glorious light from nothing. The women met again, this time equally armed, and made savage war on each other with a viciousness that only comes to enraged women. I chucked Dog back the way he had come, and he sailed into the distance flinging knives like an edged hailstorm.

When Ash Maiden's murderer had hit me the first time, flaying my chest open, I'd lost track of self-restraint. When I dove at her again, she smashed me in the forehead with her pommel stone. It must have hit pressure points on my head, for suddenly I ceased to care about the woman I fought beside, and lost all manner of thought save my cancerous obsession with killing the pale demon with the starmetal blade.

The melee that took place on that mountain top was perfect. We three ascended through combat to divine bloodlust, not just intent on killing but destroying. Like a gray mist the intruding minions of Shogg, Lord of the Forest, faded away as Hail and Dog came to understand the nature of murdering them. Carcasses dropped around us, outside the island that was our little world.

The problem was that she was better than both of us combined. Angel got tagged across the arm then a leg. I took another to the gut. Every strike separated us from who we were. Soon we weren't teaming up, but trying to overwhelm her with our respective savageries. We became iconic forces, but in the depths of that soulless murder, I suddenly accepted that I wasn't going to win. That let me understand that winning was less important to me than Defile Perilous dying. Then everything became very simple.

The glittering starmetal daiklave was rising, casting aside Angel's stroke. It traced a brilliant passage through the air, coming back around towards her for a riposte when I set my foot on Angel's hip and pushed down, throwing myself into the air. Soon the weapon and I were alone in space, coming inexorably together. Angel's body was shoved down, shoving against the ground, which pushed back against her even harder. Angel took that strength and threw it behind her. She lunged at Defile Perilous, who tried to retreat but had already committed to attacking me. I captured her blade between my hands while Angel drove her own sword through the icewalker's chest.

My heart exploded in pain. Suddenly Angel was beside me, and though I'd seen her strike home, her blade was buried to the hilt in my ribs. In shock my grip on the blade weakened, letting it pass between my hands. Defile Perilous cut me from shoulder to hip, and in gentle slow motion my body fell into two pieces.

Angel lost her mind. She landed and lunged, and Defile swept her weapon around to parry and kill as she should have done so easily now that she could focus all her attention on Angel. Yet the starmetal weapon twisted slowly, and cleft the air where Angel had been. With a crunch it bit into rock and stopped.

Defile Perilous looked down and saw Angel still. She saw the glorious hilt of the saber driven to her

sternum, nestling between her breasts. Curiously she looked at her own weapon, wondering why it had failed her, and only then saw half my bloody body trailing the ornate handle. My arm had spasmed shut when the nerves connecting it to my spinal column had been severed. It had thrown her balance off just enough.

“I lost?” Defile Perilous asked, confused, before Angel swept her own weapon upwards, taking her head. An alchemical signal glittered on her forehead and began to fade.

Dog and Hail arrived as Angel turned to me. My blood had stopped gushing and now just trickled out. All that was left was my head, an arm, and about half my chest. With three friends clustered around me, I tried to smile as the last bits of strength faded. Life was good, I decided. Then I died.

The End(ing)