

Act 1

There is an odd fate that watches over funerals in the Valley of Nine. It assures that the weather will rain, but soon after the sun will beat down with renewed vigor. There's something cathartic in the sun emerging from a torrential rain. But before the sun rose after Ash Maiden was laid to rest, the rain clouds were trapped between the towering mountains and dumped endless tears from heaven. In time the family left, and retreated to their homes to cry privately. One by one the friends departed as well, until when the sun set behind thick clouds, the church yard was empty.

We emerged like phantoms from the veil of rain. One by one figures walked out of the darkness to stand around the freshly turned earth before a marble gravestone. There were four, three men, one woman, who appeared. All had been at the funeral earlier and escorted the grieving family home. Once ensconced in familiar places with familiar things, they had departed for their own homes, but unerringly they'd been drawn back to the burial site. Now they watched the rain make mud out of the earth.

"She should have been buried in wood," spoke the gravelly voice of one. "She would have liked that."

"She would have," agreed the woman. Her voice was much softer than the other.

"Isn't it odd how the names of Bright Leaf come true in such simple ways?" asked a second man. His voice was smoother than his compatriot's. Unlike everyone else who wore pure white robes of mourning, his cloak was sky blue. In the rain they all looked gray anyway. "We thought she was named for her fairness, or the trees under which she liked to walk. But Ash Maiden came true in such a simple way I never saw it coming."

"You couldn't have, Dog," replied the woman, shortening his name out of familiarity. "This was not foreseen. It could not have been."

"Couldn't it? I wonder sometimes. Maybe had we looked a bit--"

"Stop," snapped the man who'd thought the silver urn had been a poor choice. "Shut up right now, and don't ever think that again."

"Easy now, Hail. Please, not like that. Not so soon," asked the woman quietly.

"Clockwork Dog knows what I mean," the one called Hail responded, his tone no longer ruthless. "But that way lies madness."

"Yes, yes. You're right," admitted Dog. "I know. But I can't see very much at all now. I can't see how this could have happened, and I can't see what we must do now that it has."

"That's simple," I replied quietly. I wasn't very good at speaking quietly, but I tried out of respect. "We find out who, and then we kill him."

Dog and Hail looked at the ground, while the woman looked up at me. Her eyes were questioning. "For revenge? Or for Ash Maiden?"

“Either. Both. Does it matter?” I responded.

“No. Not really,” Angel admitted. “So my question becomes, how far do you intend to take this? Since nothing you do will bring her back, do you simply desire to do bad things to bad people in her name? Would you make Ash Maiden's memory one of violence?”

“Yes,” I replied immediately, without needing to consider it. “I'll wrap the world in a burial shroud, turn the seas red with blood, and unleash horror that tears screaming across the night sky if I have to. I'm going to find her killer, kill him, and wait a thousand years until he returns in his next incarnation so I can kill him again, and again, and again. I don't care about good or bad or the damn rituals that Bright Leaf claims sent her to peace. The entire Immaculate Dogma be damned. I'm killing that maggot if I have to drown him in my spite.”

“No, you won't,” Angel flatly contradicted me. “But we will find the person responsible, and we will kill them. But it will end there.”

I stared back at her, but now I couldn't beat her in a battle of wills. “Fine. So long as we kill them.”

“That was never in question,” she responded. “It was only the methods.”

“Dog, say something,” Hail told him. “Make them see they're being stupid.”

“I can't,” Dog replied. “That is the one thing that stands clear to me. Oh, I spin arguments and show them the way they're going leads to nothing. But as soon as we split, it will come to nothing, for in the mind of him,” and Dog indicated me. “Is a madness. All balance has been thrown clear, and while Fall of Angels is still rational, should I dissuade her from accompanying him, The Ending shall wreak such a horror upon Creation that evil will have entry to the Paths of Heaven. There are two ways to stop him, and Fall of Angels going with him is one. I refuse to even consider the other. Thus Hail, it seems I must climb aboard this departing ship and pray my strength on the tiller prevents it from crashing on the shoals.” He stepped forward and pivoted, a symbolic gesture that put him beside me and Angel.

Hail saw how the circle had shifted to become a line with him as the sole outlier. In some deep part of my heart I felt terrible, for Hail was as consumed with his own grief as we were. His smooth manners had given way to coarse pronouncements, meaning that the raw pain under the surface was corroding his grace. Yet he stood on the path he saw as right and refused to step off it, even in his personal trial.

“I won't be a party to this,” he said finally and walked away.

I opened my mouth to shout something at him. Angel stopped me by smashing her fist into the side of my head hard enough that I toppled to the wet earth and saw lights and colors. She stood over me with an implacable expression. “You were about to say something stupid,” she told me.

“What?” I yelled at her. “I was going to tell Hail-”

“Something stupid that he doesn't need to hear.” She crouched down so her face was only a foot from mine. Rain poured off her features and dripped to the ground, ignored. “Listen to me. That man is a better person than we are. He's doing the right thing in his heart while he's half mad with grief, and it's tearing him from the friends who are his family. He's in agony right now, and he's bearing it alone because the people who should be helping him are about to go kill someone. But he won't bend because

his heart tells him what's right, and he listens to it before us, which is why we should listen to him. But you won't say anything that confuses or muddles his world, nor will you make his burden any heavier. He's a better person than we are, and you won't make him suffer for it.”

I looked from her to Dog. He shrugged. “She's coming along to make sure you don't do anything stupid. Now she isn't letting you do anything stupid. I'd listen to her.”

“I thought you came along because you wanted to avenge Ash Maiden's death, and find her killer?” I asked. The side of my head was beginning to throb, and I began to realize how hard Angel had hit me.

“Two birds, one stone,” she replied. “Make no mistake, and never entertain the idea that I am not committed to this goal like the the wind is committed to blow. But we do this right, or I'll leave you bound to a tree while I find and kill the murderer without you. Do you understand me?”

I told you I couldn't beat Angel in a battle of wills. She was small and cute; her body looked soft to the touch and her hands were warm. Inside her was more iron than the mountains of the East. “Very well,” I conceded.

“Good. Glad we have that settled.” She reached down, picked me up, set me on my feet, and brushed the mud off my back. “Put a cold compress on that, or it will swell. And stop poking it.”

“I love you,” blurted Invisible Dog.

“What?” asked Angel, for she hadn't been paying attention. She was a woman of iron, but she'd taken one too many blows to the helmet and was also deaf.

“I said, 'let's get out of the rain,’” Dog lied.

“Good plan. My family's barn? It's warm, and we can figure out our next move,” she suggested.

We agreed, and set off. Once we were at the barn, she left to get food and drink from inside. I turned to Dog, “Let's get out of the rain?” I asked amused. “That was the best you could come up with?”

“Shut up,” he replied. Then he stood in the corner insulting himself.

We set out for Nibeldamt later that evening. There was a lot of quarreling first, but eventually I told them this was my insane mission for revenge so we were doing it my way. Instead of reducing the quarreling, this amplified it, but we still left for Nibeldamt. Across nine miles of mountain road that had carried mule trains to the iron mines of deserted Jaggerfall we ran until dawn when it had been two full days since I slept. The Unconquered Sun rose to find us trotting downhill. Light poured through the mountains and reflected off the thin dusting of snow that lay at the roots of the thin grass. A few clouds wafted by but the air was too cold to sustain them. We ran until nightfall and finally collapsed in a pile underneath huge pine trees. At dawn we started again and in time came to the gray city underneath a cloud of smoke.

In the absence of a major smelting center in the mountains of Duun Nibeldamt grew from a not two-shits village to a collection of smelters on the Meander River. Nearly seven thousand people huddled under an umbrella of dirty soot. They had repaired a First Age foundry as best they could. Now metal pumped out the door and ash into the air. It got into the dirt and turned it black. People still came,

because there was money in iron that cared little for the varieties of the market. There was always war, and so long as there was war, there would be steel. By a looming black smithy of filthy granite sat a line of townhouses. In one of them lived family of Ash Maiden's who had brought her body back to Highmere. The wife had stayed for the funeral. The father couldn't. We met him at his door, looking like death.

There's only so much room for conversation with a group like ours. We didn't say anything as he escorted us to his kitchen and sat us around the table. He offered beer and food. We declined politely, hunched over in our seats, waiting. Anvil was his name, like his father before him, and like his only son.

"I suppose you could only be here for one reason," he observed while studying our trio.

"Just one," I replied. Now my voice was soft, but it was the softness of terrible strain.

"When I was coming home from work, my nephew Wide Eyes met me at my door. He's a little guy, doesn't even have his true name yet. He said his Momma had to talk to me. He said it couldn't wait. When I got there, she was in the house, but the kids weren't allowed in. She met me at the door. The body was on the table.

"She said Ash Maiden had been found floating in the river. She might have been drowned, I don't really know. There was water in her mouth, and river sludge under her fingernails. Some people who had been fishing on a dock pulled her out. One of them recognized her. They took her to my sister's house, and I came by later. A couple days later one of the mining caravans went up to the mountains, and they said they'd stop at Highmere. I had to stay here because the coke isn't burning right, but sent my wife and my kids, so they could take my niece home."

"She didn't drown," interjected Dog, his voice just as quiet as mine. "We saw the body before she was cremated. There were finger bruises on her throat. She was strangled."

Anvil looked up at him. "You couldn't have seen the body for days. She would have started to--"

"If he says they were finger bruises, they were," Angel flatly contradicted what Anvil wanted to say. The big foundry man looked strangely at the small woman who seemed little more than a girl. Her body was hidden by the white cloak of mourning, showing no adult development, and she had always had a young face. But now the cloak was dirt speckled, and her eyes were dark and grim. When she said that Clockwork Dog would never make a mistake, even analyzing a body that had begun to turn, the iron in her voice underlied her words like a steel frame. Anvil's words were like fruitless summer breezes against her certainty.

"Now," I said and leaned forward over the table. With an effort I placed my hands still on the oak planks between us, but they were rigidly still like petrified animals. "Who would have had reason to kill her?"

Anvil was hiding something. He looked at us three furies, consumed as we were with our desire for murderous revenge, and knew that we would start something he did not want done. Written in his eyes were the desires for us to go away and not make waves. But just as clearly he understood the inviolate will of Angel, the determination to see this through in Dog, and the near breaking madness born of my own grief. Worst of all for him, we were reading him even as he was reading us, and he knew it. As

much as he wanted to hide what he knew, he understood that our madness could turn dangerous to Ash Maiden's family very quickly.

“She had been seen a lot with a northman called Frozen Thane. The foreman at the foundry has been looking for Frozen Thane, claims the icewalker stole money from him. It's a guy named Firm Grip. He's a big guy, and doesn't worry too much about the rules of law or the faith. There aren't be many things he wouldn't do if his boss told him to get some money back,” Anvil explained,

““Did you tell him anything?” asked Dog. “About Ash Maiden or Frozen Thane?”

“There was nothing I knew to tell him. She stayed with my sister on the east side. Anyone could have told her that. I don't know where this northman stays, or what's happened to him. There haven't been any more bodies floating in the river, if that's what you're asking.”

“No, we're asking if you told Firm Grip where he could find Ash Maiden, so he could ask her where Frozen Thane is. And if you did, then we shall find out about it, and visit the cost of your indiscretion upon you,” I explained to him. “But if you honored the rules of family loyalty, then we have no fear that you kept your silence, and we thank you for your help.”

“Where's Firm Grip?” asked Angel.

Anvil was staring at me, appalled by my veiled yet clear threat to kill him. He didn't turn to look at her when answering, “He works nights. He should be at the foundry now.”

“Then we'll be leaving now. Thank you for the hospitality, Anvil, son of Anvil.” Angel rose, and put a hand on my shoulder. I was staring into Anvil's eyes, looking for some hint of indiscretion. I wanted very badly to find it, but my comrades tugged at my shoulders, pulling me towards a more deserving victim of my attention. Reluctantly I gave way to them, and the three of us departed.

“You aren't after revenge,” called Anvil, as he watched us leave from his stoop. “You're after madness.”

“We're after something much worse than that,” muttered Dog. “We're chasing the reason for madness.”

I ignored him, and Angel probably had never heard at all. Soon we stood before the mammoth building, a functional relic of a past age. Plumes bore the smoke away above it, and a hundred windows glowed with red light. The foundry ran day and night. It had been made in the First Age, when the mad Solars had required metal for their armies. After the great cataclysms that ended that era, men still needed steel of superlative quality, and they ventured into the dark foundry and found ways to get it running again. Now the doorways shone with the light of molten iron, and heat poured from it like a physical force. The night shift was gathering outside, not yet ready to go in, while the day shift hadn't quite left. Smoke was turning our white clothes black while we watched. Soon we couldn't be told from the workers. A side door let us in to find a bored sweeper, who pointed out Firm Grip's office. We let ourselves in without knocking.

Firm Grip was another big man. He had big arms and a big gut that seemed to be chewing on the desk its owner was bent over. Dressed in a leather smock with hood, the foreman sweated profusely in the darkness. Beads of it ran off his face and plopped onto the paperwork he was studying. Great noises emanated from the innards of the smelting equipment, titanic smashing sounds and grinding noises. We studied him for a while before he even noticed we were there. Dirt and grime was worked well into his

apron, and his seat was outlined on the floor in soot.

“Who're you lot?” he grunted when he noticed us. His face was fat and droopy. It looked like it was melting. Maybe he hadn't shaved and maybe his dark jawline was simply coated in ash, but sweat beaded up on his chin. I decided I didn't like him.

“We're friends of Ash Maiden,” Angel told him. “We heard you were looking for her before she died.”

“The dead one? What of it?” he asked.

“Yes, the dead one,” I told him. “Why were you looking for her?”

“Who sent you? What's the dead girl have to do with me?”

“That is the question,” I observed. “We want to know when you saw her last, what happened when you did.”

“Get out, now, or I'll throw you out.”

I was about to explain to him the order in which I intended to break his fingers, when Dog cut me off. “Have you been having problems getting your coke burn right? Same fuel, same air, but the burn isn't as hot?” he asked.

Firm Grip made a weird face before saying, “Yeah. And?”

“Your intake shafts are jammed. Let them cool down, send a couple guys up there with spikes to purge the flues. Also, I noticed outside that your furnace hinges are building up gunk. If you clean that, you can pour the metal when it's hotter.”

The foreman rolled his eyes from right to left across the three of us. They stopped on Clockwork Dog.

“Check your equipment. We'll be back tomorrow,” Clockwork Dog finished. “Tell us what we need to know then. Tell us everything you know about Ash Maiden. Do that, and I'll tell you what's really wrong with your coke burn.”

“I don't know anything about the dead girl,” he grunted.

“Maybe ten percent of your coke costs will remind you. You must be wasting that much or more trying to get the fire hot enough. Think about it. And check the flues. They're filthy.” With that Dog rose and gestured us to the door with a nod of his head. We fell in behind him and left.

“What's wrong with his coke burn?” Angel asked, as we trooped down a steep stairwell.

“I have no idea,” Dog admitted. “Do you care?” he added curiously.

“No,” she admitted.

“Then the flues?” I asked.

“Did that man look like he's obsessed with cleanliness?” Dog replied. “I'd bet my next meal he hasn't cleaned his flues on time. The hinges I noticed when we came in.”

“Then explain why Firm Grip is going to tell us anything tomorrow,” I told him.

Clockwork Dog sighed. “Firm Grip isn't going to tell us anything. But he wasn't going to tell us anything anyway. As soon as his shift gets off, he's going to go running to whoever tells him what to do, and tell him that we were asking about Ash Maiden. We sleep now and follow him in the morning. Then we find out who's giving the orders, and skip a bunch of meaningless violence.”

“How do you-” Angel started.

“Because Firm Grip's an idiot. He's a follower, a sheep. He doesn't wipe himself without orders. Someone, whoever thought Frozen Thane owed him money, told him to go get it, and he did. But he didn't kill her,” Dog added. “His hands are way too big.”

Angel and I exchanged glances. In unison we shrugged. “Now, someone go get some food. We're going to sleep in that lumber yard,” Dog told us as we left the side door we'd come in. It was directly before the main entrance to the foundry, and full of heaps of wood. Also piled high were mounds of charcoal bricks. They were the coke the foundry used. Angel ran off to acquire food, while we squatted in the shadows. “You take first watch,” Dog concluded, and wrapped himself in his cloak to sleep.

“Why-”

“Because you're going to stay up and obsess anyway,” he replied.

I stared at the back of his head, mouth open, searching for words. Eventually I remembered to shut my jaw, and positioned myself so I had a good view. In time Angel returned with bread and a water skin, and we consumed much of that. Then she curled up and went to sleep as well. I gazed into the foundry and watched men pour liquid metal, pounded from ore. I thought of the way sunlight looked when it went through long fair hair. Smiles would come so easily to some lips that they seemed poised to relax into a grin. She'd had such striking eyes. In time Dog woke so I could get some rest from our exertions. I stayed awake with him as long as I could, but eventually succumbed. Even then I slept but little. Waking up was worse.

“The shift's changing,” Angel told me.

“Where's Dog?”

“Looking at a coke pile. I was about to wake him when he bolted upright and started babbling something. I think he actually did figure out what was wrong with the burn.”

“He needs to focus on what's important,” I grumbled.

Angel looked at me oddly before turning her attention to the foundry. We waited and watched, while the workers changed. Eventually Firm Grip appeared, still wearing his leather smock, and hurried away from the smithy. After finding Clockwork Dog, we lit from rooftop to rooftop and haunted the alleyways as we scurried after him. He didn't look around, and it was easy to stay concealed in the all pervading gloom.

In time we followed him to a mansion on the outskirts of the town. Upwind of the perpetual gales which whipped down off the highlands the air was clean, and the sun shared the sky with clouds and birds. Meadow larks sang in the trees that marched in stately file across the manicured gardens. Firm Grip stood out like a dirt stain on the sky as he entered the vast doors inlaid with sapphires. The entire mansion was of marble and done with blue highlights. Most amazing of all, waterfalls poured from alcoves in the walls, and ran into carefully orchestrated channels that twisted about the magnificent property. The entire thing stank of wealth.

“I don't see any guard,” I said as we crouched behind a stone wall several hundred yards away. “No, wait, there they are. Two on the walls, three on the patio, one by the doors.”

“The one by the door isn't a guard. He's a butler,” Angel informed me.

“How do you know?” Dog asked.

“He's butling.”

We both looked at her with the same expression. She matched our look. “What? I used to have a butler. Before the wars and I came to Highmere.”

Dog and I exchanged a glance. By common agreement, we never asked anyone in the group about their past. Still, Angel could hack her way through the forest with only a knife and sever tree limbs bigger than her waist with that same knife. I couldn't imagine her being waited on by anyone, nor requiring butling.

“Well, anyway, how do we sneak inside?” I asked.

“We don't,” Dog told me. “That's a Dynast. The crest on the door is Ragara, and the second one is Peleps.”

“And?” I asked again.

“Those are Dynasts,” Dog repeated, looking at me like he expected that to mean something. “From the Realm? The Blessed Isle?”

“I know what a Dynast is,” I retorted. “But I see no reason not to go in there. You were the one who said where ever Firm Grip went is where we can find some answers. He came here, and we know he doesn't live here. So inside that house are answers.”

“You're not listening. That's probably the man who runs the foundry. The foundry is from the First Age, which means that it needs magic to run, which means the man who really runs it isn't a man. And if it's a Dynast, that means it's an immortal, one of the Chosen of the Dragons.”

“And?” I kept repeating.

“That's an Exalted. One of the Chosen. He's a bigger badass than all of us combined, and he may have a wife who could probably beat Angel senseless with her dining fork. We're mortals. They aren't. We don't go smashing around, breaking stuff. He'll kill you, and then your revenge won't happen.”

I considered his point. "Think you can take a Dynast?" I asked Angel.

"Of course not," she replied.

"Want to anyway?"

"Till death, baby," she replied.

"That's my girl. You hit right, I'll go left?" I asked.

"Good deal. Go on my signal," she replied, and took off running, still crouching behind the low wall.

Clockwork Dog stared at me. "Why did she call you baby? Are you and-"

"Don't be an ass. Now let's go break into to a mansion. Besides, if you impress her, she might call you baby to," I told him, and lead him around the side of the house, staying low and keeping to the new dawn shadows. "Ready to hit this guy?" I asked Dog when we were in position.

"Terrestrial," he corrected me. "And no, but that certainly won't do any good now."

"I thought you said it was a Dynast?" I asked him.

"It is. Terrestrial is what people who don't like Dynasts call them. And since we're about to really dislike this guy, we may as well get the language right."

"Whatever," I replied agreeably. There were sudden shouts and cries from the far end, and we hopped the mansion's outer wall and tore across the manicured lawns. The guards were distracted and didn't notice us as we vaulted ornamental rails. I was in midair above a beautifully trimmed hedge before the first cry went up from our side of the building.

Directly below me, where I had been intending to land, was a magnificently armored specimen of fighting potential in full war regalia. Lacquered plates bound together to form mail protected his head and blossomed with pointy bits, dissuading me from simply landing on him. Even as I sailed downwards, his hand flew through a circular motion, whipping the long curved blade at his side from the sheath in an exquisitely practiced motion. Dog, who lacked my jumping abilities, crashed from the solid mass of greenery I was descending over and hit the guard in the knees, the only part of him that wasn't pointy. Feet went out from underneath his body, the guard missed his swing, and tumbled to the ground only scarcely before my knees smashed into the side of his ornamental helmet. There's only so much armor will do when two hundred odd pounds of me comes crashing down on top of it, sandwiching the head between knees and a flagstone walkway. I rolled off and stood up, and quickly stole his sword. Clockwork Dog stole the matching knife. We set off towards the mansion again.

More cries went up when we leaped the circling stream in it's sculpted marble path. Two guards, equipped just as the last, had come around the rear corner, and sent up a cry. We were only a dozen feet from a small door, but by the time we got there someone inside had locked it. I stepped away, dropped into a stance, and yelled, "Can you pick it?" to Dog.

"Sure," he replied with a futile laugh, not filling me with confidence. The guard on the left was

outdistancing his companion, and we met in clash of blades that showered my unprotected eyes in sparks. I rolled my body out of the way and lashed out at his feet. He leaped clear and tumbled with a beautiful combat roll. My master would have been proud. The man behind tried to take my head off, and I barely parried. I pivoted to try to get behind him, and spared a glance at my comrade. There was no chance I'd be able to beat both of these guys at the same time.

Dog crouched, stared at the lock for a second, then backed up and body checked it with all his strength. On the third hit the door splintered. He vanished inside.

The first guy was back on his feet now, and with his comrade they moved to force me to the wall. There was no place to run, so I feinted at one, lunged for the other, and ducked to avoid the first's riposte. They realized immediately I was no novice with the blade, and launched blinding flurries, relying on their numbers to batter through my guard. It should have worked too, but Dog reappeared with a barrel and smashed one distracted guard over the head. Whiskey flew everywhere, and sparks from my desperate defense met the crude but potent mountain beverage. Everything caught fire, including me. Fortunately, I wasn't burning as bad as the guard.

He shrieked like a cat plunged into hell even though the fire couldn't have gotten into his armor yet, and dove headfirst into the shallow ornamental river. That didn't work too well for him. While the second guard finished his combo, he only tagged me once. I feinted for his legs, swung a burning sleeve at his eyes to blind him, and booted him in the chest, knocking him after his fellow. Then I dropped and rolled, putting out the alcohol, and entered the house.

This would have been a great place to rob, had I still been in that line of work. Provided one could get past the guards, the staggering opulence of the interior ornamentation would have set a successful thief for life. Gold, silver, jade, and platinum graced marble and amber. Ornamental columns soared from floor to ceiling and framed priceless statuary. Someone had polished the floor to a mirror shine. In fact, it was brighter than the mirror I had at home.

"Nice place," Dog observed as we fled through the halls, body breaching doors as they appeared, heading inwards.

"Love to visit again," I replied. We came around a corner, and another armed man tried to block our way. As my companion dropped to his knees and slid between the guard's legs, I took four running steps from an end table to the wall to the ceiling and sailed above his head. The guard was perplexed and didn't decide to attempt to kill me until I was past. Dog smashed the side of one mailed knee as he went by, and that guard took a sudden inadvertent interest in the floor.

"Don't think they'll invite you," Dog added.

"Why not?" I retorted. In unison we crashed into the next door. The beautiful mahogany held, but the plaster door frame did not.

"You just aren't popular," Dog informed me.

"I've noticed that."

We got up and fled through the foyer. As we went in the trappings grew steadily more and more magnificent, until finally we came to an area so staggeringly wealthy I couldn't imagine that the steel

business made anyone this much money. Juxtaposed with the unearthly wealth were dirty footprints. They lead us upstairs and to a final doorway. This one had a curtain instead of a door, depriving us of the joy of a spectacularly destructive entrance, but I cut it in half anyway. That was just for effect.

Inside Firm Grip stared at us, bracing himself for a fight. He was by a small dining table, where a man was eating breakfast, paying out entrance no mind. He was either stupid, blissfully oblivious, or frighteningly powerful. The room itself was all stone and metal, with no wood. The table was cast silver, and had a second table setting that was empty. The breakfast-eater dabbed his lips with a silk napkin and looked up at me.

I'm not one for male beauty, but this guy could have had any girl he wanted in anyplace I've ever been. Not just attractive, he looked regal. The man had charisma. His arched brows conveyed deep thoughtfulness, yet his eyes were youthful and sparkled merrily. His breakfast robe was brilliant red with threads of gold.

"Morning gentlemen," he replied calmly.

"What do you know of Ash Maiden?" I snapped, whipping the point of the long curved blade towards his face. It stopped a hair from his eye, but he never flinched.

"Refresh my memory," he ordered me. His voice was used to command. "Who is Ash Maiden?"

"She's dead," I told him.

"Then I can't very well know her any more, can I?" he replied.

Infuriated, I swept the blade over my head and aimed for one of his hands, attempting to wound him and show we meant business. Unfortunately, he meant more business.

The diner flashed out of his chair, caught my wrist, and struck me in the chest with an open palm. The world stopped, and the moment of being hit lasted forever. Then I flew backwards, sailed through the door I'd entered, and hit a wall hard enough to become lodged in it, my feet dangling a foot above the floor. I couldn't see and could barely breath.

"Wow, that hurt," I gurgled when I stopped sucking air.

"My name is Ragara Aino," he introduced himself, dusting off his smoking jacket. Clockwork Dog stared at him and brought the knife up defensively. Ragara Aino ignored it. "Now, who are you?"

"Fuzzy Puppy," lied Dog.

"Fuzzy Puppy," repeated Ragara Aino, tasting the words. "Right. And your wall-mounted companion?"

"Fluffy Bunny," I wheezed.

"Ah. Comedians," he judged. "Very well. Firm Grip, are these the men who came to see you?"

"Uh, yeah," answered the foreman, staring at my in awe. He had crept around the room so he could look at me bug-eyed. "You put him into a wall," he whispered in awe.

“Quite. So you three came to my foreman, asked him about Ash Maiden, then followed him when he left my smelting plant. Correct?” he asked Dog.

“More or less.”

“I see,” he nodded. “Now are you her friends, old lovers, or simply fools?”

“We're vengeance,” Dog replied, and lunged at the Terrestrial. He had no chance of winning, but his sudden attack came with such reckless abandon for his own survival, that it drove Ragara back as my calculated strike had not. The Dynast back pedaled, blocking knife strike after knife strike with his bare hands, and every time brilliant gold and burgundy light flashed from his fingertips. Cascading sparks lit the room, overshadowing the candles, and crackled against the stone walls, leaving scorch marks wherever they touched. Dog drove him back, almost to the far wall, before Aino managed to get his balance. Then he replied with a flurry of his own, open hands flicking fire and stardust at Dog's face and eyes. Amazingly, my human friend evaded the immediate retaliation, but the follow up took his legs out from under him. Aino smacked him, twirling his body and lofting him into the air. Before he could land, he struck again and again, flashing hands that burned flesh through clothing. Dog crashed earthward and the air fled his lungs when he hit. Ragara twisted, and cocked a strike that would have broken the fallen man's body into pieces. It never landed.

“Know that if you hurt him again, you will die,” said Angel in a voice like the death she promised. The razor edge of a stolen blade lay against the Dynast's spine, and she stood with all her weight coiled against it. For a moment the Dynast considered the situation, then relaxed, and stood erect very slowly.

“And you are?” he asked.

“Cuddly Kitten,” she replied, her voice never changing. I realized then that Angel was scary when she was pissed, something I'd been objectively aware of before but never really known on an emotional level.

“Very well, Cuddly Kitten, I'll let him live,” Ragara replied. “I'm Ragara Aino, though I suddenly regret I wasn't named Squiggles the Fox. Peer pressure, you know.” He looked around and saw Firm Grip, who'd lost his grip on consciousness and lay in a heap.

“We want to know what happened to Ash Maiden. Did you order her killed or did you do it yourself?” Angel asked.

“Neither, to be perfectly honest.” At the point of a sword held by a woman with a self preservation instinct only in comparison to me, he looked completely at ease. His voice was smooth as the silk he wore. By now I was beginning to get my senses back, a testament to how hard he'd hit me. I noticed then that Ragara's clothes were damaged as they shouldn't have been. They weren't torn but burned.

“But you know who did,” Angel added. “Or else that,” she cocked her head to the big pile of steel worker without moving her eyes. “Would never have come running straight to you.”

The Terrestrial turned around very slowly, his hands held open away from his sides. When he stopped the point of her blade nestled against his Adam's apple. “Now that's an interesting question. One that might be worth something,” he answered.

“It wasn't a question, and it's worth me running three feet of steel through your throat,” she answered.

I managed to pry myself out of the wall. While I still had the sword handle clutched in my grip, the blade lay in several pieces on the floor. Discarding the useless hunk of metal, I flexed my fingers, and walked back into the room with the rest.

“How do you feel, baby?” asked Angel.

“Wonderful, Kitten.”

“Who are you?” he asked again. “Anathema?”

“Angry,” I replied.

“No, you're too weak. You're mortals, aren't you? All three of you are really mortals. That's amazing. I'm as impressed with your bravery as I am awed by your stupidity.” With that he threw his head back in a burst of wild laughter. It was enjoyment tainted with mockery. It was also overwhelmingly cocky. “I can't wait to tell this story at my next party. It'll be worth the damage, just for that.”

“Not if you don't answer our questions,” I told him. “You won't make it to your next party.”

“Oh, because the two of you will stop me?”

“We'll kill you,” Angel replied.

“You think you can? You think this is all I'm capable of? You think you've seen my true potential?” he retorted insulted.

“You think you've seen mine?” replied Angel, turning the question back on him.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do,” Ragara Aino replied, and suddenly burst into brilliant light. Stones of fire tumbled from his shoulders and crashed onto molten rocks by his feet. His hair blossomed with a burgundy glow, and every time his head moved lava flickered from his hair in volcanic plumes of fire and ash. More than ever before a tangible aura of power radiated from him. Rocks tumbled from the ceiling, crashing to the earth around them, as dovetailing streamers of pure Essence radiated from the Dragon-Blooded noble.

Angel lunged, slamming all her weight behind the blade and driving it into his throat. It bounced off burning skin, and Ragara swept it aside with a forearm. Then he lunged for her. She retreated, blocking his advance with the weapon, but only managed to use his momentum to throw herself backwards. I grabbed the table and drove it down onto his head with an overhand swung. He partially blocked, but the brilliant incandescence of his skin proved dangerous, and splintered the metal. Before I could swing again, he swept a foot at my head. It swept inches from my face as I swayed backwards, leaving a smell of sulfur and brimstone. I popped upright and struck as Angel slashed at his legs.

Ragara simply wasn't there. Somehow he moved faster than fist or blade, and counterattacked from a small pedestal. I was ready for the open palm, but even when I blocked it seared my hands, burning my flesh and tearing apart my skin. Angel was able to block his other hand, and it rang against her sword.

But then I made the mistake of attacking and found only empty air. I leaned forward and saw that Ragara was bending down, ducking below me, exposing his back. I really thought I could get him, and never noticed his leg striking down like a scorpion's tale. Pain blossomed in the base of my skull, and I tumbled.

Lights flashed on the walls, and the ring of steel echoed through the room. I was able to hold onto conscious to watch the implacable Dynast focus all his attention on Angel, bearing down on her assured of a quick win. But she was elusive, and fled from his onslaught like a feather in the wind. No matter the power and speed he brought to bear, the only thing that suffered was his house. Rents appeared in the walls, and the ceiling collapsed by the door. I honestly thought she had a chance.

But even a lucky mouse can't fight a tiger. She was outclassed, and when she slipped her blade past the near invulnerable guard to flick it across his throat, it only screeched across his throat like fingernails on slate. Ragara cackled wildly, and swung while she was still recovering from her attack. He caught her in the face, the chest, the shoulder and the leg. Blood escaped her skin before fountains of essence fire. Then she dropped, and the Terrestrial stood alone.

"Silken Lotus Style," he said to himself. At first his aura was too bright to see through and blotted out his features, but as he panted it faded until he could be seen like a shadow on the sun. "That's only taught in the far south, where the assassin guild of the Black Adder does business. You may be a mortal my dear, but you are not just after revenge for that dead twit." With a curious expression, he shook his head and turned away.

I punched him in the face as hard as I possibly could, throwing my body after my fist in a suicidal effort that held nothing back. My knuckles caught him dead in the jaw, and he tumbled backwards into a wall. Every bone in my hand shattered.

"Tell me who killed her," I demanded, trying to pick myself off the ground with only one hand.

"You worthless peasant," cursed the Dynast. "You blasphemous clod. You ant, you maggot, you filth, you swine." Then he lapsed into the high tongue of the Scarlet Empire, which I'd never learned. His composure was gone, and he screeched profanity at me like a spoiled child. When he stood up, I could see I'd broken his jaw, which unfortunately did nothing to prevent him from talking.

Doubled over, I got my feet under me, but my back didn't have enough strength to pull me erect. Ragara Aino took two running steps and punted my face, throwing me backwards. I flipped twice before destroying a delicate dresser, crashing to a heap with splinters and finery tumbling about me. The Dynast strode over and stomped on me until I couldn't distinguish between the impacts of his foot. Eventually, I lost conscious.

Torture was being unconscious but denied relief from my dreams. I walked across an alpine meadow, where grass met the sky on the shoulders of great peaks, and all the world's forests were spread below me, running off to the Wyld in the distance. Slight breezes danced through my hair, and zephyrs of the north kissed my neck. It was a place burned forever into my memory.

Before me stood the most beautiful woman who will ever have lived. She was fair of skin and lithe of arm. Her eyes transfixed me, even as her thick hair seduced me with its dance upon the air. Every inch of her skin radiated vitality, and the gentle rise and fall of her breast was as light as the air she breathed. She was so beautiful that hurt, even in my memory.

"I love you, Ash Maiden. I did then, and I do now. I always will," I repeated my words. I knew what she had said then. She had looked down quietly and so sad my heart broke, even as she cried that she had to break it.

"I love you too," she told me in this place. She always did in the dream.

"Forever?" I asked.

"So long as you are with me."

I held her close. She whispered she'd never leave me, she would always understand, and she would touch me so my turmoil calmed to tranquility. She forgave me all my sins, just because I asked. In her arms I could sleep again.

"I wish this was real," I whispered, holding her so tight.

"So long as I'm in your dream I am," she told me. "Here I'm alive. Stay with me so I don't have to die."

"Forever," I promised.

"Forever?" she asked.

"Forever and ever," I swore.

She embraced me back, but her hands were rough on my back, and shook me. I stared up at an ugly face and knew I was awake. For a moment the hurt and longing was so powerful I couldn't keep the anguish under control, and I swore yet again that I would never sleep again. Like every waking since, I didn't think I could survive that dream one more time.

"I think he's gonna cry," yelled the ugly thug, as he shook me by the ropes that bound my wrists. "I think he's honestly going to cry. How hard did you hit him, boss?"

"Hard enough," came a twisted grunt. Ragara Aino walked into my line of sight, looking furious. His face was bandaged, and it interfered with the smooth sound of his voice. Now he growled like Firm Grip had. "Is he awake?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Wake the other two."

The thug left, and the Dynast crouched down in front of me. "You lost, maggot. I won, and I'm going to kill you. You'll be reborn as a worm, perhaps one that lives in a dog's ass. I hope it is a miserable existence for you, deserving of vermin who attacked the chosen of the dragons. You know, I'm not even going to let you get any revenge by haunting me? I've thought of that. No, I have ways of sending you on. I don't know if you'll be able to choose Lethe or to be reborn as an intestinal parasite, but I can assure you your demise will inflict all the suffering I wish I could assure you in the next life.

"That goes for you to," he added, facing out of my field of vision. "You're the she-wolf who tried to

cut me. Normally I'd applaud the skill, but now I'm just going to drag information out of you. And you, the stupid one, will get a lesson in truth first and hardest. Weasel, Rat, put that one on the rack."

For some reason, I wasn't the stupid one, because they left me alone. I began to see where we were. It was an underground room, where the roots of great trees hung from the ceiling. The floor was carved into the deep rock that reached waist high up the walls. Angel lay next to me, sorely in need of the mercy she was named to bring. Her face was streaked with blood that dripped into the dirt. Her hands were tied to her feet, doubling her over into a fetal position. While the Dragon-Blooded martial artist raged at her, insulting her and telling her what horrors he intended to inflict, she lay nearly catatonic. I couldn't tell if it was an act, or she was far from the waking world. If so, I prayed her dreams were better than mine.

Clockwork Dog was being carried to a metal rack, where his wrists and ankles were set into iron harnesses. Once there he was bound with leather straps, and stripped to the waist. The rack was set on castors, and it rolled over, leaving him facing down while his bare back lay exposed. Ragara Aino, finally finished with cursing at the comatose Angel, walked over to him and accepted a multitailed whip from one of the thugs. They leered at each other in excitement and stepped back to allow their stone faced boss to work.

"Now," said the Dynast. "Tell me what I want to know."

"You're getting ripped off," instantly replied Dog. "The coke you're buying is one part in seven ash. It should be at most one in twenty."

Ragara, who hadn't even struck yet, paused with the whip behind his head, staring at Dog in confusion. Caught off guard as he was by the apparent nonsequitor, his train of thought derailed. "What?" he sputtered.

"The coke in your lumber yard. It has too much ash in it. That's why it isn't burning as hot. Your supplier is selling you a bad product. You can still get the right burn temperature, but you need to grind the coke first. Also, increase the air intake to the furnaces. Even with good product, they aren't running anywhere near full efficiency," Dog explained.

"That wasn't what I was asking," replied the Dynast.

"I know, but I assume you don't like wasting money. Given bad fuel and a dirty burn, you're wasting nearly half your fuel budget. I don't know how much money that is, but given the size of the foundry, it's got to be at least a talent a year."

Our captor leaned very close to Dog and pulled his chin with the whip handle until they were looking at each other eye to eye. "How do you know that?" he asked, searching Dog's eyes. Dog stared back, looking into the conflicted brown eyes of the supernaturally potent Dynast. There was fury there, but there was also greed.

"I looked at your lumber yard. You could have figured it out too, of course. It's not hard to tell. But your yard man didn't check closely enough."

"It is hard to get good help these days," agreed Ragara.

“Please don't hit me,” added Dog.

“Now, your true nature comes out,” Ragara gloated. “I'm going to go check that myself. If you're telling me the truth, your death shall be quicker, and I may forgive some of your transgressions.” The other promised as he dropped the whip onto Dog's back. It lay between his shoulder blades. Grunting, Ragara stepped away from Dog as if he was soiled to be in the captive's presence.

“What about the others?”

“Death by fire.”

“What if I told you why your steel rusts faster than it should, and how to fix that? Or why the molds keep breaking?” continued Dog.

Ragara looked at him curiously. “How do you know I won't just torture it out of you?”

“Because you just promised you wouldn't, and if you do anyway, then I know you'll only break your word again. Besides, there are a lot of things wrong with your plant, and I won't tell you how to fix them. If you torture me, you won't even know if I'm telling the truth, or just lying to make you stop hitting me. And you can't afford to waste entire lines of steel to test my theories, but can't afford to keep wasting money doing it the wrong way.”

“Can't afford to waste money?” the Dynast scoffed. “Do you have any idea how much money I have?”

“Enough that you want more, and you're making enough that the percentage you lose every year replacing your molds unnecessarily has got to be huge. How much is a mold worth? A house? Two?”

“Shut up,” ordered the rich and greedy Dragon-Blood.

“Check the coke,” promised Dog, ignoring the order. “See if I'm right.”

“We shall see,” retorted Ragara Aino, and he turned to go. His men, disappointed that no one was going to be tortured, left with him. There was no door to this room, so they blocked the entrance with a table, and piled boxes in front of it on the other side. They were temporarily alone.

“Have I ever told you that you're my hero?” asked Angel, not moving in the slightest from her position of apparent unconsciousness.

“No,” replied Dog. “But now is a perfect time to start.”

“I'll name my firstborn after you,” she promised.

“Can I be the father?” he asked. She laughed like he was joking, and he played it off like he was just trying to raise her spirits.

“I don't suppose-” I asked, leaving the question unfinished.

“I lie a lot,” Dog admitted blandly. “It's one of my failings. But the coke part is correct. It will take him a while to go down there and check. I did my part. Ending, think of a way to get out of here.”

We had all been tied the same way, hands to legs in front of us. Fortunately, when I'd punched Ragara his face had not only broken my fingers, hand, and wrist, but my radius and ulna were both fractured completely. They gave when I pushed them, at the minor cost of unbelievable pain. It wasn't hard to figure a way out of my bonds, but it was really, really going to hurt.

I bent my hand into a cylinder and worked it through the rope. Sometimes my vision would white-out in pain, but I clung to consciousness because my dreams were worse. Eventually, I got my broken hand free. That loosened the ropes and soon I was standing. Dog was next, and then Angel. Of all of us, Dog was in the best shape, since he'd gone down the fastest. We made Angel comfortable since with her thigh broken she couldn't walk. Then we turned to the blocked door.

"Not so much," I concluded after throwing my weight against it. It didn't even budge. If some of Ragara's iron was stored in this basement, he could have barricaded that shut so a dozen men wouldn't have been able to force it. We considered the ceiling, interspersed with tree roots as it was. "Ideas, smart guy?" I asked.

"Not getting any," he replied.

"You're useless," I concluded. "For that, I get to father Angel's baby she names after you."

"The hell you are," Dog replied. "Any baby of yours will be dumb, ugly and crazy, and I refuse to let you besmirch my good name."

"I think I'm insulted by that," judged Angel.

"Sorry," apologized Dog. "You could never have a baby as dumb, ugly, or nearly as crazy as The Ending is."

"That wasn't exactly a compliment," she observed.

"You did agree with his plan to attack a Dynast. I told you that wasn't a good idea," he pointed out.

"You came to," she retorted.

Dog looked at her with an inscrutable expression. "I did at that. Since I don't have the crazy excuse, I must just be dumb."

I interrupted to head that line of conversation off. This was neither the time nor the place, and we needed to focus. "What about digging through the ceiling? How deep can we be if those roots reach this far?"

"Up to twice the height of the tree," Dog observed, turning to examine them with me. "So conceivably a hundred feet deep or more."

"Could we rig something so the roof collapses? We could wait until Ragara returns, pull the ceiling down on him, and then make our escape," I suggested.

"First, he's an Immaculate Dragon-Blood. Collapsing the room would probably only annoy him.

Second, he has goons, lots of them, and we're in no condition to fight our way out of here.”

“You're not being very positive, here,” I scolded him.

“I'm just saying it wouldn't work,” he replied. “I'm not preventing you from doing it.”

“Hey guys, I'm getting a little light headed, so I'm going to take a nap now. Wake me when we have to fight somebody,” interjected Angel in a dreamy tone. Immediately we stopped thinking about escape and turned to her. She was losing blood, fast, from a number of frighteningly deep cuts she'd taken in the fight. My plan with the ceiling would take time we didn't have. We needed an alternative.

“The wall,” Dog said without explanation while I tried to stop her bleeding. We'd put her down, and I was doing what I could to staunch the wounds. Our shirts went to that purpose, but there wasn't much blood left in her. In addition, instead of simply being beaten, most of her injuries were second or third degree burns, and the blood seeped through the skin. Dog couldn't watch my desperate, ineffectual treatment. Going to the wall, he started digging at the dirt with his fingers until they bled. He worked near the door, and I went to help him with my good hand. With desperation urging us on, we put a hole in the wall just past the pile of wooden cases that blocked the door. Cascades of dirt tumbled down from above, and the earth creaked, but the roots held it still.

“Help me lift her,” Dog told me.

“No, I'll carry her. You fight,” I disagreed.

He looked up at me. “You know you're better at that than I am.”

“And she's better than us both, but she's out and I only have one hand. But my back isn't broken, so at least we won't slow you down. I'll carry her; you fight.”

“I don't know if I can,” he admitted quietly.

“There's no choice. I can't do it. Just remember, if you lose, she dies. We do to, but let's not kid ourselves about what you care about, shall we?”

Dog said nothing else as he rolled Angel onto my back as gently as he could. He stabilized her as I stood, and held her cheek a moment longer than he had too before forcefully turning away. Without pause he crept through the hole and stalked down the hallway. I followed.

There was no one in the next room, but either Weasel or Rat sat in the room beyond, smoking a hand rolled cigarette. Dog jumped him from behind, landed on his back, and just started hitting him as fast and ruthlessly as he could. Both Angel and I had shown him a few tricks, so he knew the basics of what he was doing, but only barely. What he lacked in skill he made up for in desperation and the element of surprise.

I felt somewhat bad about that. Not for Rat (I think it was Rat) because he deserved everything he got, and I watched Clockwork Dog smash his teeth out against a stone with apathy. No, I felt sorry for Dog, because to make him fight with desperation I'd had to beat him in the face with losing the woman he loved. That was pretty miserable, made worse by the fact that I knew she didn't love him back. Still, everything I'd said had been true, and unrequited love certainly wasn't going to get requited if we all

got killed when Ragara Aino returned. Yet it was with a low feeling of guilt poisoning my gut that I watched him do terrible things to the thug until we knew he wouldn't get up any time soon. From there we continued to creep on. Twice more he ambushed sentries, lunging at them from the darkness, where the grime that smeared his skin had camouflaged his approach. When he laid their bodies in corners, and beckoned us onwards, I observed their wounds, noting the ferocity that had inflicted them and felt even worse for him.

Not far beyond that was a stair that went up. We went until the stairs turned from rough earth to laid stone. There we turned aside, and crossed a wide cellar filled with wine bottles and casks. In the back several great beams were clustered together, supporting the ceiling. We hid behind that so Dog could go scout out ahead. He returned shortly.

“There's five men at the top of the stairs, and more outside. Not like the ones we've seen so far, they're armed and armored like the guards we fought in the garden. I don't know why they're up there, but I know I can't take that many at once.”

“All right,” I accepted that. “What next?”

“Let me think,” he replied. His lips moved like they had in the barn, when he'd felt the weight of his cowardice for not admitting to Angel what he'd really said. In a burst of intuition, I realized he was working himself up to a hopeless fight, just to do something while she was bleeding. Maybe that was what we had to do, but I didn't want it to happen when he thought he was failing her.

“You did good,” I told him, breaking him out of his reverie. “Three men, you were injured, and we're in a bad way.”

“Not good enough,” he replied, somewhat despairingly.

“Good enough,” I disagreed. “We're here, aren't we? We're not still in that room.”

“But now I have to fight ten times that many more,” he objected.

“Only if there's no other way. Any chance that brain of yours can think us around having to fight half a claw of armed guards?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, staring up at the ceiling. He looked at it blankly for several seconds. “Yes,” he contradicted himself, staring upwards curiously.

“Digging?” I asked.

“No, burning,” he explained. With that he ran to a wall where small casks stood in neat rows. He picked one, uncorked it, and raced back to liberally douse the wooden pillar with its contents, whiskey by the smell. He explained more while he worked, “There were no pillars below. Here we're closer to the surface with less weight on the roof, but now just in this one place, there are beams holding up the ceiling. Why?”

“Weak spot?” I suggested. He finished his barrel, got two more, and handed me one. I dumped that out next to his, covering the old wood.

“Possible. Or something very heavy just above this point. Perhaps the pump that moves the water in Ragara's little stream, or a particularly heavy, and therefore valuable bit of statuary. Sold gold water nymphs, or something.”

“Right above us?” I asked.

“Almost certainly. Get back,” he ordered.

“How are you going to light it?” I asked, doing as he bid. It was a dumb question, but I was getting a bit heady. Ragara obviously kept some potent stuff in his basement. In response, he held up Rat's package of tobacco, and his flint and steel.

“There are times when I really need a cigarette,” he explained and started sparking.

The room was almost full of alcohol vapors. They caught on the first spark, and flash fires raced upwards. The pillars caught instantly, but the fires also found homes in the barrel racks. It was all almost silent save the crackling that earth walls muffled. We huddled by the door, listening for the guards above and greedily gulping fresh air before the fire could get it. We very nearly asphyxiated on hot gas before the creaking in the center got louder, and the roof started buckling.

Half the ceiling collapsed at once, smashing wine bottles and destroying exotic cheeses. Two ornamental streams broke and poured down the gaping hole, knocking over the remaining hard liqueur. Barrels started cracking around us as we ran to the hole, climbed up a beautiful marble representation of the Scarlet Empress done in rubies and crimson, and popped out of the earth. Air, saturated with alcohol fumes, began to whistle up out of the dirt, carrying smoke. We were running before the air itself caught fire, sending goutts of blue fire everywhere. Fortunately, the entire garden started to burn behind us, covering our escape.

“That guy is really going to be mad,” I observed to Clockwork Dog as we scrambled away from the manor house.

“I never really liked him that much,” Dog admitted.

“Really?”

“Yep. Very gaudy taste. No books. All wealth, no culture.”

“What about now?” I asked, as a pillar of smoke rose from the exquisite yard, reaching for the sky.

“Less money, still no culture.”

“Think he'll take it personally?” I asked.

“Oh, I hope so,” Dog enthused to me. “Let's not be here when he finds out, shall we?”

“Good plan,” I agreed. We hopped a low wall and got away from there with all due haste.