

AETHER TORRENT #3
"CIRRUS'S TARGET"

Written by

Jack Duffe

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FADE IN:

EXT. CARAVAN BLOCK - DAY

POLICEMEN finish arresting the leftover CARAVAN MEMBERS in the street outside the antique shop.

Across the street, the blinds on Tori's window are down.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - TORI'S ROOM - DAY

AVANI lifts up a blade of the blinds and peeks out.

TORI sits on her bed with a granola bar in her mouth and laces up a hiking boot. Her jacket is absent. A full duffel bag leans against the bed.

TORI
(muffled)
You got everything?

Avani's backpack sits at her feet. She wears sandals.

AVANI
Everything I came with. Which way are we leaving?

Tori wolfs down the rest of her snack.

TORI
There's a secret route that leads out under the walls, but it's a little unpleasant.

AVANI
How so?

TORI
It's, um. The sewer.

EXT. CARAVAN BLOCK - DAY

A few police paddy-wagon trucks drive away with the captives.

A butch female figure in her 40s named CIRRUS looks over the edge. Her skin is light blue on white and she wears an oversized t-shirt and flared shorts.

CIRRUS

No wonder I smelled magic. Must
be a raid.

CIRRUS'S P.O.V.:

Cirrus rapidly glances over everyone in sight.

CIRRUS (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Brown skin, green shirt, gold
dots. Come on, where is she?

Cirrus's hair is a bunch of short white tendrils.

CIRRUS (CONT'D)

Did they arrest my target? Oh
that would just figure.

A SWIRL OF AIR encircles her.

From ground level she appears to be a small TORNADO localized on the roof. Avani still peeks through Tori's blinds.

Several OFFICERS down below look up and REACT in surprise.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - TORI'S ROOM - DAY

Avani retreats from the blinds.

AVANI

I think they saw me!

TORI

(lifts her bag)
Time to go, then.

EXT. CARAVAN BLOCK - DAY

The wind on the roof dies down. Four animal paws stand near the edge.

Cirrus's shirt and shorts hang from a vaguely canine jaw.

Cirrus has taken on her true form: a *wind tiger*, an Air-elemental creature with long, flat wing tendrils extending from her collarbones.

Several of the officers draw their guns on her.

Cirrus LEAPS off the building with a GUST OF AIR.

The cops down below guard against a DOWNWARD GALE, which ruins the aim of some and blows away the guns of others.

A gray-on-white-skinned raiza LIEUTENANT watches her leave. A human OFFICER speaks up.

OFFICER

Lieutenant! Do we go after it?

The Lieutenant's pants have a third leg for his shark-tail. His black claws are filed flat and unthreatening.

LIEUTENANT

How? The foreigner is dead. We can't track any strays.

(glances at apartments)

But we can be thorough.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - HALL - DAY

Tori and Avani hurry down a hall. Avani still wears her thin green sweatshirt with the diamond of gold dots on the chest.

TORI

Doesn't it get hot in that sweatshirt?

AVANI

My temple makes me wear it.

TORI

And that has *what* bearing on your life now?

Avani stops.

She drops her backpack and WHIPS OFF her sweatshirt, revealing a lighter green t-shirt with the same dots.

Tori blinks. Her eyes are gray, for the record.

TORI (CONT'D)

You sure like green, huh?

AVANI

(stuffs sweatshirt in pack)
It's the color of *Teizen*, my patron god.

EXT. MEDDON STREETS - DAY

The police trucks roll along, SIRENS BLARING. Their top speed is in the 20 MPH range.

Cirrus LANDS in the street on all fours, clothes still in her mouth, and SWEEPS her collar-wings forward.

A BLAST OF WIND hits the leading truck, HALTING it and CRACKING its windshield.

Each of the trucks behind it CRASHES into the ones in front of them. The IMPACTS knock each of the rear doors open.

Cirrus LEAPS at the leading truck --

An OPAQUE TORNADO surrounds her --

And she STOMPS the roof, clothed and in human form.

ADDANC is the last one out of the truck. Cirrus reaches down, GRABS him by the back of the shirt and LIFTS him onto the roof. The other escapees make a COMMOTION in the background.

CIRRUS

Hey. Did you see a brown girl wearing green get arrested or killed? Her name is Avani.

ADDANC

What? No! She escaped with Tori!

CIRRUS

What's a Tori?

The DRIVER of the lead truck exits and pulls his pistol on Cirrus.

DRIVER
Hold it, monster!

Cirrus's eyebrow twitches.

She FLINGS Addanc at the driver without hesitation. Both men fall to the pavement.

CIRRUS
Escaped, huh.

Cirrus LEAPS up off-camera with another GUST following her.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - STAIRWELL - DAY

Tori and Avani descend a dim and narrow stairwell.

TORI
By the way, I think it's best if we head for the western coast. I know a place there where we can stay.

AVANI
That's good. It fits with what I wanted to do, too.

TORI
(turns corner)
Really? What's that?

They slow their quick descent for conversation.

AVANI
People are more open to religion near an ocean or desert. They see so much *nothing* there. I want to help them fill that nothing with the presence of the gods without my temple telling me how to do it.

TORI

(turns corner)

But being alone at the edge of nothing is a rare feeling. It lets you really think. Why fill up a perfectly good empty with anything but yourself?

Avani stops halfway down a staircase. Tori starts down the next one before she notices.

AVANI

I'll have you know that's how the gods created this world. A world full of their presence is not spiritual clutter.

TORI

Okay, sorry, can we just go?

A door opens at the bottom of the stairs Tori stands on. The Lieutenant looks in.

Tori sees him and impulsively FLINGS her bag at the door.

It HITS the door shut. The Lieutenant tries re-opening the door but Tori SLAMS it shut with her shoulder.

Avani takes her mythrill-palmed mitten out of her backpack.

AVANI

Hold on. I'll compress the door.

TORI

Wait--!

LOBBY

The Lieutenant steps back and the wall RUMBLES. The frame SQUEEZES the door tightly enough to make it CRACK.

STAIRWELL

Light shines through the crack.

TORI (CONT'D)
(deadpan)
Door's made of wood, genius.

The girls grab their luggage and RUN LIKE HELL down the remaining stairs, which go down deep.

The Lieutenant BREAKS DOWN the cracked door with ease.

He looks down just in time to see the final door SLAM.

INT. SEWER - DAY

Tori leads the way down a stone path in a sewer system resembling that of real-life Paris, France.

A GUNSHOT rings out and a bullet SHOOTS THROUGH the corner of Tori's bag.

The Lieutenant and three officers aim their guns.

LIEUTENANT
You can't escape. You can either
leave with us or die in a sewer.

Avani moves behind Tori. Tori puts her bag down and grips her knife hilt.

TORI
Okey-dokey. I like the "leaving"
one. I'll pick that.

LIEUTENANT
I'm glad to hear it. Now throw
down your weapon.

TORI
Yes sir.

Tori unsheathes and SWINGS her knife in the same motion.

The sewer water running alongside the path RISES UP in a single wave in front of her.

The wave CRASHES DOWN on the path --

KNOCKING DOWN the Lieutenant and the officers and sweeping them into the channel.

Tori and Avani flee.

The policemen bob to the surface. The officers GASP and FLAIL for the nearest dry surface. The Lieutenant RIPS OFF his shirt and coat and DIVES under.

SEWER CHANNEL

The channel is deeper than it looks. The Lieutenant's tailfin OPENS, pulling taut the membrane between the edges.

A dorsal fin OPENS in the same way.

The Lieutenant SWIMS SWIFTLY ahead.

SEWER

The girls keep running.

The Lieutenant's fin cuts the water --

His hand GRABS Tori's ankle.

Tori falls forward, guarding her face just before impact.

The Lieutenant climbs out of the water. He lifts Tori up by her ankle as he does. She KICKS at his arm to no effect.

LIEUTENANT

You're under arrest.

Avani SLAPS the wall with her mitten hand.

A chunk of the ceiling LOOSENS with a fine rain of dust.

The Lieutenant looks up --

A stone slab two feet square CRASHES down on his head.

Tori falls with him and KICKS free of his loosened grip.

Rubble decorates the Lieutenant, flat on his back. His chest rises and falls.

Tori hefts her bag.

TORI

Thanks. But you coulda done that
a minute ago.

AVANI

I saw their guns and I choked.
Forgive me. Which way are we
going now?

TORI

Same way we were. Care for a
little jaunt in the wilderness?

EXT. MEDDON - DAY

Meddon, now seen from a distance, is a walled city-state with
a river running through it. The wind turbines seen at a
distance in episode 1 surround it, embedded in the walls.

A great field of agriculture spreads out to the Northeast. A
dense, hilly forest stands to the West.

INT. BORDER FOREST - FOREST CREEK - DAY

Cirrus (human form) lazes on a branch up in a tall tree by a
creek. She looks skyward.

A serpentine cloud passes in front of the sun. A THIN,
GRAVELLY VOICE comes from nowhere.

GRAVELLY VOICE (V.O.)

Find that girl without delay,
Cirrus. Do this one thing and
you shall become a most useful
agent for us.

CIRRUS

Useful...
(yawns, stretches)
That's all I've ever been.

EXT. SEWER EXIT - DAY

A giant stone sewer tunnel sticks out of a small hill in the
forest. A creek flows into it.

Tori and Avani step through a dilated iron gate in the tunnel. Avani SLAPS the stone with her mitten and the gate returns to an impenetrable crosshatch.

EXT. FOREST CREEK - DAY

Birds CHIRP and CALL to each other in the pristine forest.

The girls follow the creek upstream. Tori stares up at the trees, her head in the clouds.

TORI

Man. Just look at all this life.
So much contrast with the city.
Now there's a treasure for you.

AVANI

That's good. You're respecting
the gods' creation already.

TORI

(looks back down)
You sure can spoil a moment.
This forest is special because
nothing deliberately made it.

Avani frowns in her direction.

Cirrus sleeps quietly on her branch. Her eyes open at the word "monsters."

AVANI (O.S.)

So I suppose "nothing" also made
monsters.

TORI (O.S.)

Nothing deliberate.

Cirrus looks down.

Tori and Avani approach her tree, oblivious.

TORI (CONT'D)

I read about this somewhere.
See, the elements in the Aether
act like pollutants.

AVANI

You think magic is poison?

The girls walk to and pass under Cirrus's branch. Cirrus watches them closely.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

What have we here? Brown skin,
green shirt, gold dots...

TORI

(overlapped by Cirrus)

I said *like* pollutants. All
bodies absorb them and that's
partly how we can summon magic,
but if an animal body absorbs
too much of one, it becomes an
elemental monster.

Cirrus hunches over and prepares to pounce.

AVANI

I can't believe you! All
monsters, especially the ones
that can take on human form, are
beloved creatures of the gods.

Cirrus BLINKS hard.

CIRRUS'S P.O.V.:

Avani walks away with Tori.

AVANI (CONT'D)

They're holy! They cannot exist
without the blessing from a
patron god or goddess because
they break the rules of
summoning magic.

Cirrus bites her thumb.

TORI (O.S.)

They don't break any rules, they
just follow ones that we can't.

AVANI (O.S.)

That's exactly my point! ...

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Just grab her. Come on, don't waste any time. But what's this about blessing?

(glances aside)

She's not going anywhere. I can take her whenever I want.

Cirrus LEAPS off her branch with a whisper-quiet RUSTLE of leaves.

EXT. BORDER FOREST - DAY

The sun indicates the time as early evening.

EXT. WATERFALL POOL - DAY

A CASCADING 30-FOOT WATERFALL beats down a natural jagged staircase into a wide pool. Trees in the upper background and gray rock walls in the foreground frame it nicely.

The sun has already set behind the waterfall. Tori and Avani stand near the pool. Their luggage is on the ground.

TORI

Come on, nature girl, you've never done it once?

AVANI

Of course, to bathe, but that's a private thing.

(turns to leave)

You can go first. I'll be praying.

Tori slips off her vest, sits on her duffel bag and unties her hiking boots.

TORI

Hmph. What are you, six?

AVANI

I'm nineteen, thank you.

TORI

Ha, three years younger than me.

AVANI

And twelve more mature.

TORI

(calls tauntingly)

Human bodies are nature too!

Surprise, you're living in one!

Avani keeps walking away, deeper into the trees.

Tori removes her shoes and socks and stands up, facing the waterfall.

Tori looks down to undo her pants. She looks up and FREEZES.

A blindingly handsome redheaded YOUNG MAN reclines on a flat rock in the cascading waterfall. He HUMS melodically, stark naked, letting the water drench him.

Tori stares. Lets her pants fall. She wears boxer shorts.

The young man rolls his head to Tori and SMILES at her. His eyes are hypnotically, unnaturally blue.

Tori keeps staring. She blushes.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Avani takes off her sandals, sits cross-legged and splays her hands on the ground.

Cirrus, still in human form, alights on a branch above her.

AVANI

Great Teizen below, I thank you
from my very bones for
delivering us from harm.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Get to the good part. Talk about
monsters again.

Avani softly closes her brown eyes and bows her head low, letting her black hair just barely touch the soil.

AVANI (CONT'D)

I thank you also for Your avenger, but I worry about her. She seems truly content with disbelieving. Please grant her Your protection, the clarity to understand Your ways and the wisdom to resist all sinful temptations.

EXT. WATERFALL POOL - DAY

Tori's shirt lands on her knife holster by her duffel bag.

Tori stands at the edge of the pool in her undergarments. Her figure is athletic in the "working out" sense, not the "swimsuit model" sense.

TORI

So what's your name?

The young man stands under the waterfall, submerged to the hip bones. He HUMS melodically again.

TORI (CONT'D)

(steps into water)

Well aren't you a rare one.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Cirrus looks down and makes a "get on with it" motion. Avani hasn't moved from her praying pose.

AVANI

What must I do to make her see Your glory? You know I wish only to be useful to You...

Cirrus CLENCHES her jaw. She leans forward as if to jump down but Avani's next words stop her.

AVANI (CONT'D)

No. I misspoke. You are not so coldly utilitarian as to want that from me.

(MORE)

AVANI (CONT'D)

In Your words, all living things
have purpose, but none is to be
a mere unthinking tool for
anyone or anything.

Cirrus holds her pose, eyes wide.

AVANI (CONT'D)

They would have me be your tool.
They would have me impose on...
(abruptly stands up)
That's it! I won't impose, I'll
set a good example and let her
come to Your ways in time.

Avani steps into her sandals and strides away.

AVANI (CONT'D)

I'll start right now -- swallow
my embarrassment and bathe with
Tori to build her trust.

Cirrus watches her leave.

CIRRUS

"She escaped with Tori." It's
definitely her. But what's this
about purpose?

EXT. WATERFALL POOL - DAY

Tori draws closer to the middle of the pool, thoroughly
entranced. The water gets deeper as she goes.

The young man approaches from the opposite side. The water
doesn't get deeper for him.

Tori's boxers touch the water.

TORI

Silly me. Still dressed.

Tori hooks her thumbs under her sports bra.

Avani enters the scene.

AVANI

Hey, Tori? -- *Tori!*

The young man and Tori simultaneously turn their heads at Avani. Tori BLUSHES HEAVILY.

TORI

Little busy here, Skirt!

The young man SMILES wide. His blue eyes GLOW.

AVANI

Get out of there! *It's a Kelpie!*

Tori looks back at the young man too late. His body turns translucent white and he sinks straight down.

Tori gets PULLED UNDERWATER.

Avani looks on in horror.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Cirrus rocks on her heels up on her branch.

CIRRUS

If I don't, I might as well not go back. But my body is still useful even if I'm not. Someone would come for me. Maybe even...

(shudders)

I have to be sure about this.

AVANI (O.S.)

(distant)

Get out of there! *It's a Kelpie!*

Cirrus bolts to her feet.

CIRRUS

Now's my chance!

EXT. WATERFALL POOL - DAY

Tori BREAHCES the surface just long enough to GASP a breath.

TORI

My--

(pulled under, resurfaces)

--My *knife*--

(pulled under again)

UNDERWATER

A CURRENT snakes around Tori and pulls her to a steep drop-off. Tori CLAWS at the current and her hands go through.

WATERFALL POOL

Avani unzips Tori's bag and rummages inside.

AVANI

(rapidly)

Great Fleuve forgive her she
might sort of have to kill your
beloved pet in self-defense.

Tori resurfaces and clings to part of the rock wall.

A WHIRLPOOL forms in the middle of the water.

The water SWIRLS UP and forms into a KELPIE, a white water-horse monster with a blue mane and giraffe-like reticulations on its neck and shoulders.

Tori looks back at it --

The Kelpie CHARGES at her on the surface of the water, quickly blurring into a WAVE --

Which CRASHES into Tori and takes her under again.

Avani finds Tori's knife under her discarded shirt. She HURLS the knife into the pool --

Cirrus FLICKS her wrist --

A GUST knocks the knife just short of the middle of the pool.

UNDERWATER

The Kelpie's current PINS Tori to the bottom. It's about twelve feet deep in the middle.

The knife sinks and lands on the top of the drop-off, well out of reach.

WATERFALL POOL

Avani scratches her head in mind-wracking panic.

CIRRUS (O.S.)
Having problems?

Cirrus stands two feet from her.

Avani BACKS UP, surprised.

AVANI
What -- who are you?

CIRRUS
Cirrus the Gale-mother. Your temple misses you, Avani Lahar.

AVANI
They *already* know I left? How?

CIRRUS
I don't know the details. I'm just supposed to bring you back.

Avani glances down. Cirrus stands between her and her backpack.

AVANI
No thank you.

CIRRUS
I overheard you pray. Your god sounds interesting. You asked him to protect your friend?

Avani looks up at her, questioningly.

CIRRUS (CONT'D)
If she can survive a fight with a Kelpie, I'll believe anything your god says.

UNDERWATER

Tori is still pinned. Her lungs finally give out and she exhales a BURST of bubbles.

The Kelpie's head suddenly congeals and LUNGES at her.

Tori PUNCHES it in the nose.

The current slows perceptibly and loosens around her body.

Tori CLAWS at the Kelpie's eye. The head melds back into the current, which loosens enough to free her.

WATERFALL POOL

Tori's bubbles reach the surface.

Cirrus cracks her knuckles.

CIRRUS (CONT'D)

Too bad. I can't afford to throw
in my lot with an inattentive
god. Now you're leaving with me.

Tori's head BREACHES the water and she GASPS FOR AIR.

CIRRUS (CONT'D)

What the--?!

AVANI

Tori! I threw you your knife!

TORI

I know, thanks!

UNDERWATER

Tori goes under again and grabs her knife.

The Kelpie's head rises from the deeper part.

Tori sees it.

WATERFALL POOL

The shoreline recedes considerably.

A HUGE SWELL rises in the middle and CRASHES like an ocean wave into the waterfall.

Tori runs ahead of the returning tide.

Cirrus JUMPS straight up. The returning wave hits Avani's knees and she STUMBLES backwards.

The girls' luggage gets soaked.

Tori PANTS for breath.

TORI

Ah, crap, now I'll have to dry
it all.

Cirrus hangs diagonally from the nearest tree, clutching a branch one-handed and bracing her feet on the trunk.

CIRRUS

You think you're done? You can't
kill a Kelpie like that.

TORI

The hell are you?

CIRRUS

(points towards pool)
Better watch out.

The Kelpie congeals at the waterfall and STOMPS the water threateningly.

Tori grips her knife.

TORI

I swear, if it's not one thing
today it's another.

Avani steps back and folds her hands.

Cirrus SWINGS herself up and sits on the branch.

The Kelpie CHARGES.

Tori holds her left hand to the back of her knife, points it at the Kelpie --

And SWINGS the blade with a GRUNT OF EXERTION.

A mass of water FLIES OUT of the Kelpie in the direction she swung.

A formless blob of thick grease remains to SPLASH over the water.

Its momentum carries it to Tori and flows it over her feet.

TORI (CONT'D)
(kicks wildly)
Oh, ew! Ick!

Tori SWINGS her knife again and water FLIES OUT of the grease, leaving a fine powder on the water and her feet.

CIRRUS
Unbelievable...

Something underneath Cirrus CRACKS HEAVILY. She looks down.

Avani holds her mitten to the trunk. A deep, jagged crack goes completely through it.

Cirrus remains on her branch. The tree CREAKS and TILTS in her direction.

She JUMPS clear before the tree comes CRASHING down into the waterfall pool. The impact SCATTERS the Kelpie's powdery remains.

Cirrus lands in a crouch. Tori holds her knife to her neck before she finishes standing up.

TORI
I'll ask again.

CIRRUS
You think you can hurt me? A
wind tiger is nothing like a
Kelpie.

Tori steps away from Cirrus and looks her over.

Cirrus stands up straight -- she's taller and more muscular than Tori despite looking and sounding twice her age.

TORI

I've read about wind tigers. They're not native to this continent and the females are usually a lot more elegant-looking than this. You're a pretty rare find! Are you a mixed-breed or something?

CIRRUS

My name is Cirrus and I'm not an animal. Hell, I'm even more dressed than you right now.

Tori BLUSHES in embarrassment and picks up her wet clothes.

Avani approaches Cirrus and folds her hands.

AVANI

Forgive her. My holy avenger has defeated the Kelpie. Will you now hear and believe the words of my patron?

Tori looks up from gathering her clothes.

TORI

Your holy what now?

INT. FOREST PATH - NIGHT

The sun has set.

Tori, fully dressed and dry, glances behind herself on a narrow forest path.

Avani and Cirrus lag far behind.

CIRRUS

There's nothing to explain, my magic just comes naturally.

AVANI

That's because the Goddess of Air has blessed your kind. She may be in opposition to my patron but I'm sure we can get along. "Let all elements come together in life," so He says.

CIRRUS

I like that. Now tell me about that usefulness thing again.

Tori SIGHS.

TORI (V.O.)

Another religious-minded stray.
I've got a collection now.
(half-smile)
At least they're special.

Tori turns around.

TORI (CONT'D)

Yo, Skirt! Quit lagging!

CIRRUS

Her name is Avani! Respect it!

TORI

You quit lagging too, Kitty.

Cirrus GROWLS low. A SWIRL of wind surrounds her. Avani backs away.

Cirrus's front wind tiger paws hit the ground.

TORI (CONT'D)

(holds up hands)
Okay, okay, sorry, Cirrus!

Cirrus DASHES at Tori. The resulting wind WHIPS Avani's hair and skirt around.

The moon hangs over the forest. A cacophony of CRASHES comes from the forest as trees WOBBLE or FALL OVER in a line.

TORI (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Give me a break! I give
nicknames to everybody I like,
honest! Stop your pet, Avani!
Come on!

FADE OUT