

AETHER TORRENT #4
"NATURE'S WAY"

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - NIGHT

A village, just big enough to support 30 people, sits at the edge of a large lake protected on all sides by wooded hills. A single light shines away from the small houses.

A ten-year-old boy named ANDY faces a tree with his back to us. He pulls up his pants in front and reaches down for a lantern.

A HEAVY RUSTLE off-screen stops his hand. Andy nervously glances back and forth.

A thin tongue FLICKS out of a long, pointed muzzle.

The boy looks up and freezes in fear.

A DIRE ANTEATER, a creature somewhere between an anteater and an ape, peers menacingly at Andy from up in the tree.

The beast JUMPS down at us.

EXT. BORDER FOREST - DAY

Morning sunlight hits a thinly-treed part of the forest.

TORI's hand unzips her blue duffel bag and opens it. Inside is a bunch of clothes, her jacket, a black metal box and a gray metal box.

Tori, AVANI and CIRRUS (human form) sit in a triangle around the bag. Tori takes out and opens the gray box, revealing it to be full of unwrapped granola bars.

TORI

Hope granola's okay, it's all I
had time to pack.

CIRRUS

(grabs a few)
Fine by me.

Cirrus CRUNCHES on two at once. Avani doesn't take any.

AVANI

I apologize for not packing some of your food when I had the chance. I didn't expect to travel through wilderness.

TORI

It's no crisis, just a problem. There's a lot of nothing between here and that person we can stay with, so we'll need to detour for some food.

A common-looking ANT grabs one of Cirrus's many crumbs and makes off with it.

AVANI (O.S.)

Who is that "person" anyway? And what place could be safe from the kinds of people after me?

TORI (O.S.)

She's just somebody I know in a big city called East Granbridge. And trust me, her place is safe from anything.

Tori glances at Cirrus, who pauses eating to reply.

TORI (CONT'D)

Present company included.

CIRRUS

I doubt that, but it's a moot point. You girls are too interesting to hurt. Now where are we detouring?

TORI

To a little village I know. The catch is that everybody there knows Grampus, my old boss I told you about.

QUICK FLASHBACK:

Back in episode 2, Avani strikes GRAMPUS in the hand and he crumples to the ground, knocking her down with his momentum.

Avani looks worried. Cirrus CRUNCHES on more granola bars.

TORI (CONT'D)

Plus, his own sister leads the village, so let me do the talking and *for cryin' out loud* Cirrus don't eat like a common kid! How old are you, anyway?

Cirrus chews politely. She brushes the crumbs off her shirt.

CIRRUS

(mouth full)

Over twenty-one.

EXT. FOREST LAKE - DAY

The trio crests a hill.

The wide rain-fed lake GLITTERS with sunlight before them. The village stands at the far end.

Tori smiles. Avani and Cirrus stare in wonder.

EXT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - DAY

A fresh grave stands under the tree from the night before. Andy's lantern still burns as a head-marker.

KURNUNG, a gray-on-white raiza bulkier than Grampus, kneels at the grave. She has a pair of brass rings pierced through one of her hairless eyebrows.

Tori, Avani and Cirrus arrive, led by a trio of CHILDREN, two humans and a raiza.

HUMAN GIRL

Miss Kurnung! Look, look, Tori's here!

Kurnung stands up without turning. She's stripped to the waist but the only feature of her chest is a ridge of muscle.

KURNUNG
 (baritone voice)
 What brings her?

TORI
 Grampus wanted you to meet a
 couple new members... but that
 grave looks new. Who was it?

Kurnung finally turns around.

KURNUNG
 Andy. A young boy.

EXT. LAKESHORE - DAY

The three kids play on and around wind-tiger-form Cirrus,
 GIGGLING as they do. Cirrus lets them. She looks blissful.

INT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - DAY

Kurnung walks with Tori and Avani past the huts, carrying
 both of their bags with one arm. Random VILLAGERS wave hello.

KURNUNG (CONT'D)
 It smells of desperation. Dire
 anteaters never attacked people
 before. We've lost crabs in the
 past, but never children.

AVANI
 Crabs?

TORI
 They raise *rüstungs* here. Look,
 there's a baby one now.

A real-life coconut crab, a land crab large enough to
 straddle a hubcap, eats an apple at the side of the path.

Avani kneels down to it. The crab's antennae flick her hand.

AVANI
 Oh, how cute. Doesn't the vessel
 for Water magic come from them?

KURNUNG

Correct. We process their moltings into carapite. The children love to help.

TORI

How've they taken the news? They didn't look very affected.

Kurnung turns up her sharkish nose and looks down at Tori.

KURNUNG

You expect them to be? Unlike my brother's subjects, *they* can control themselves.

(smile, distant gaze)

Such useful children. I love them all.

EXT. LAKESHORE - DAY

Cirrus's shirt and shorts lay in a heap. The LAUGHTER of more kids comes from nearby.

A long pair of antennae ominously pokes out of the water.

INT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - GUEST HUT - DAY

Kurnung sets the luggage on the floor of a sparse guest hut. It has two beds, a window and nothing else. Tori and Avani look around at all the nothing.

KURNUNG (CONT'D)

You joined our organization at the perfect time, miss Lahar. Kill our killer and I will find you very useful.

AVANI

Putting down a predator will solve nothing. A dire anteater eating humans suggests a disturbance in the holy balance of its territory.

KURNUNG

(chuckle)

Holy balance? Seriously now.
Nothing is balanced out here.

INFORMATIVE MAP

An image like the following takes up our view.
The squared peninsula and the smudge of green
appear as Kurnung speaks.



KURNUNG (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The peninsula you stand upon is
the most undesirable on the
continent thanks to Border
Forest.

GUEST HUT

Kurnung looms over Avani to highlight her point.

KURNUNG (CONT'D)

It keeps all manner of dangerous
monsters bottled in the
peninsula. The only way to deal
with them is by force.

AVANI

With every grain of due respect,
Ma'am Kurnung, I know how to
handle monsters. Euthanasia is
not the only option you have.

KURNUNG

Tori? Your opinion?

TORI

Well, Avani *is* experienced with
monsters. She got one to follow
her, after all.

EXT. LAKESHORE - DAY

Four more CHILDREN try to climb on top of Cirrus, bringing
the total to seven.

HUMAN BOY (O.S.)

Hey, no! Bad crab! Go away!

Cirrus lifts her head.

KAZ, a rüstung the height of a Great Dane, crawls out of the water.

The kids on Cirrus's back slide off and hide behind her.

RAIZA BOY

It's Kaz! He broke outta the lake cage again!

HUMAN GIRL

What'll we do? He's a meanie!

Kaz turns his thick armored body towards Cirrus and the kids.

Cirrus FLAPS her collarbone wings straight and DASHES at him.

Kaz opens his claws --

And SNAPS one at Cirrus, who JUMPS to miss it.

Cirrus lands on Kaz's back, crouches --

And KICKS off. The space between her and Kaz distorts with a BANG of implosion --

Strong enough to flip Kaz onto his back.

The kids CHEER. Cirrus struts proudly over to her clothes and a WHIRLWIND surrounds her.

Kurnung makes the scene first. Tori and Avani follow with a couple unimportant villagers.

Cirrus is dressed and in human form. Kaz FLAILS helplessly on his back. The kids surround Kaz and poke at him.

CIRRUS

Oh, hi. Just playing with --
(notices them)

Hey! Get away from that!

KURNUNG

(smiles toothily)

How fortunate. If you can flip over an adult rüstung, you can help solve our problem.

CIRRUS

Beg pardon?

EXT. MEETING HUT - DAY

Assorted villagers, both parents and children, file into the largest domed hut in the village. Tori and Cirrus argue in hushed tones nearby. Avani looks out for eavesdroppers.

TORI

I'm sorry you got dragged into--

CIRRUS

--That's not my point. I want to make this crystal clear. I am not helping out to be useful to anybody. I'm doing it because there's a buried child over there with no organs left.

AVANI

That is my motivation too. If we investigate the--

CIRRUS

(growls)

--Screw investigating. If it would protect the other kids, I'd kill every dire-anything on the continent.

Avani blinks at Cirrus.

Tori's surprised expression turns into a smile.

TORI

A mothering instinct that jumps species so easily is pretty rare. I like it.

Tori heads for the hut and PATS Cirrus on the shoulder as she passes her.

TORI (CONT'D)
 Don't get yourself killed.
 They'd be sad.

Cirrus visibly calms down. Another WHIRLWIND surrounds her and FLAPS her clothes wildly. The wind goes opaque and her shirt and shorts FLY OUT.

Avani blinks in the wind, which quickly dies down.

Cirrus's front paws hit the ground. She talks without moving her mouth.

CIRRUS (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Hop on.

AVANI
 You can speak in that form?

CIRRUS (V.O.)
 I can control air vibrations.
 Same thing as speaking.

INT. MEETING HUT - DAY

The whole population of the village, thirty humans and raiza, sits on the straw-mat floor of the wide meeting hut. Tori paces in front of them. Kurnung stands off to the side.

TORI
 Hi there! If you didn't meet me
 before, my name is Tori.

About half of the villagers are children. They sit closest to Tori.

TORI (CONT'D)
 I'm here to talk to you about
 all the neat treasure I've seen.
 And boy have I seen a lot!

KURNUNG

Keep it in the city, Tori.

TORI

The city?

KURNUNG

My brother will not grant these children the freedom you pestered out of him. Tell them nothing more than what to expect once they work for the Caravan if you want to eat today.

TORI

(great big smile)

Of course, ma'am. Forgive me.

(V.O.)

Saltwater bitch. As though the Caravan exists anymore.

INT. BORDER FOREST - DAY

ADDANC pushes his way through the undergrowth. His black hair is wet with perspiration.

ADDANC

That bitch. The Caravan is ruined 'cause of her! The others lost control of themselves once they broke free, but not Addanc, like. Takes more than that to rattle one of Kurnung's boys.

A RUSTLE from above makes him stop.

Addanc looks up. A dire anteater looks down, five feet above.

The creature SNIFFS loudly.

ADDANC (CONT'D)

Not in the mood. Leave.

The dire anteater JUMPS DOWN --

Addanc JUMPS back.

The monster lands on its feet, turns its head and FLICKS its long tongue at Addanc.

It hits him in the side, CUTTING through his clothes with a corrosive fluid.

Addanc grits his teeth --

KICKS the monster in the throat and BEATS it about the head.

The dire anteater's claws take a SWIPE at him and miss.

Addanc KICKS it to the ground and keeps on KICKING.

The forest canopy moves in the breeze. Addanc brutalizes his animal foe off-screen until the BEATING sounds turn to hollow THUMPS of blunt object on meat.

EXT. BORDER FOREST - DAY

Cirrus flies far above the forest. Avani's arms wrap around her neck above the wings.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

(half-teasingly)

You're awfully trusting, you know. You're riding on somebody who this time yesterday was ready and willing to abduct you. That's unhealthy.

AVANI

I suppose. I trust you because you are easy to decipher. I have seen your soul and found nothing to fear in it.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Oh really now. What did it look like?

AVANI

A strong mother looking for purpose now that her children have left.

Cirrus's eyes FLASH open and she drops like a rock.

Avani CLINGS to Cirrus's neck.

AVANI (CONT'D)
Cirrus! *Cirrus!* The trees!

The thinning forest rushes closer.

Cirrus SNAPS her wings out --

A downward BLAST of wind stalls them in midair and RUSTLES the trees below.

Air RUSHES over Cirrus's wings. The flight continues.

Avani hugs Cirrus's neck for dear life.

AVANI (CONT'D)
Forgive me, I meant no offense.

Cirrus descends, somewhat more gently this time.

CIRRUS (V.O.)
You're a perceptive girl, Avani.
Use your eyes.

Avani looks over Cirrus's head.

INT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

A metropolis of great craggy termite mounds rise out of a wide, burned-out clearing in the forest.

Cirrus lands. Avani dismounts. It's quiet.

CIRRUS (V.O.) (CONT'D)
All these mounds, yet I don't
hear, see or smell any
predators. If you wanted an
imbalance, here's the spot.

Avani approaches the nearest mound. It's the smallest one of the bunch yet easily twice her height. She brushes her fingers over its rough surface.

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

Is there an Elementist
explanation? Like, angry gods?

Avani picks up a burnt stick and examines it.

AVANI

No. It looks like a fire roasted
these colonies and starved the
anteater into attacking the boy.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Then why didn't the fire spread
further?

AVANI

I don't know. I wonder if it was
a complete cull.

Avani sticks the stick in a dime-sized hole in the mound.

SUICIDE ANT MOUND

The stick enters a vertical shaft and wiggles around.

A thick, inch-long SUICIDE ANT climbs up the shaft to
investigate.

FOREST CLEARING

Avani withdraws her stick. The suicide ant clings to the end.

Avani stares at the ant close-up. It's orange and black and
shiny. Cirrus sniffs at it.

AVANI

This continent hasn't the
climate for ants this big. Maybe
there *is* an Elementist
explanation.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

It smells like oil.

AVANI
 (glances at Cirrus)
 Like *what*?

The ant sprints down the stick to the back of Avani's hand and BURSTS INTO FLAME.

Avani SCREAMS in pain and SLAPS the ant off.

The ant lands at the bottom of the mound, still burning in self-immolation. Avani's sandal STOMPS it out.

Avani's hand TREMBLES under a shallow yet clearly painful burn.

EXT. FOREST LAKE - DAY

Tori walks up the rim of the lake-surrounding ridge of hills.

TORI (V.O.)
 Way to go, Tori. You coulda said
 "Tell them yourself," but no,
 you didn't want to cause
 problems.

Addanc marches up the other side.

ADDANC
 (muttering rehearsal)
 She caused so many problems,
 Ma'am Kurnung. So many. She was
 a traitor, and now--

TORI (V.O.)
 --Those kids will want to be
 common little thieves just
 because you couldn't say no to
 someone who looks like her. Face
 it, Tori--

Tori and Addanc reach the top of the rim at the same time. There's a distance of about twenty feet between them.

TORI (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 --You're the only one to blame!

ADDANC
 (simultaneous)
 --She's the only one to blame!

Tori and Addanc freeze. They look at each other.

ADDANC (CONT'D)
 Torrent.

TORI
 Addanc.

ADDANC
 Where's your knife?

TORI
 (cracks knuckles)
 Took it off.

INT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

The suicide ant smolders. Wisps of its smoke veer gently towards a couple of the mound-holes.

AVANI (O.S.)
 Clearly the great god Degalvyi concentrated Fire magic here and made monsters of these ants. They are too dangerous to eat, so the Dire Anteaters moved on.

Cirrus licks Avani's burn. Avani retrieves her mythril-palmed mitten from a pocket in her skirt with her free hand.

AVANI (CONT'D)
 I'm not a Fire Elementist, so I can't exorcise the magic here. Luckily, elementalism still offers a solution. I pray for your forgiveness, Degalvyi.

SUICIDE ANT MOUND

The smoke rises up the shaft.

Towards the top, more suicide ants catch its scent. Little rough balls of blue powder are stuck to the walls.

FOREST CLEARING

Avani slips her mitten on her left hand with her teeth. The mythrill part is on the back rather than the palm now. She holds it to the mound.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

How can I help?

AVANI

You can blow away all the dust
this will cause.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Wait, look up there!

Suicide ants emerge from the top with the rough blue balls in their mandibles. The ants IMMOLATE themselves in unison, resulting in a single BIG GREEN FLAME.

Columns of suicide ants suddenly POUR out of the many holes.

Avani's eyelid TWITCHES --

The mound COLLAPSES like a sand castle, billowing out a huge dust cloud. Cirrus BLOWS the cloud away with a FLAP of her wings.

More suicide ants begin to flow from the other mounds.

The first legion crawls up out of the layer of dust that was their mound.

Avani and Cirrus look around. The ants close in.

EXT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - DAY

Tori and Addanc TUMBLE down the hill towards the village, locked in a grapple.

They hit a flatter part of the hill before the bottom and disentangle. Addanc stands up first.

ADDANC

Why keep me from the village?
What are you afraid I'll say?

Tori HEADBUTTS Addanc in the stomach. He doubles over and she SHOVES him.

Addanc rolls a few yards down the rest of the hill.

TORI

I'll worry about that later.
Right now this is payback for
ratting me out to Grampus.

ADDANC

You deserved it, like.

TORI

What's your problem with me?!

Addanc charges back up the hill at her.

ADDANC

You always made me *useless!*

Tori stays put --

And KICKS him in the face with her hiking boot when he enters her range.

The force of it knocks Addanc back down the hill.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Three mounds are missing. A TORNADO expands in the clearing and thousands of little flames die out inside it.

Avani lets go of Cirrus and runs to another mound. Cirrus PANTS for breath.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Hurry up, I'm not sure how long
I can keep doing this!

Still more ants pour fresh from another mound. Avani HITS it with the back of her mitten and it COLLAPSES like the first.

She jogs to another mound. The army pouring from it EXPLODES INTO FLAME, turning it into a hellish volcano.

Avani retreats to Cirrus.

AVANI

I can only safely do one at a time!

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Forget about safety!

Avani CLINGS to Cirrus. Cirrus braces herself --

And summons another TORNADO to take out the charging horde.

EXT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - DAY

Addanc stands up and wipes off his face. He sweats. Several villagers have gathered to watch.

Tori descends the hill.

TORI

That's your reason for hating me? That's it? That's all?

ADDANC

By making me useless to the Caravan you took away my reason to live. You must be punished!

Addanc charges her again. Tori doesn't put up her guard.

He throws one punch and it CONNECTS perfectly with her cheek, jolting her head aside and making her step back.

Addanc hesitates, astonished with his own hit.

TORI

Did that satisfy you?

Tori glances down.

Addanc's shirt is discolored where the Dire Anteater's tongue hit him.

Tori ELBOWS him hard in the forehead, knocking him away.

TORI (CONT'D)

You *idiot!* You're fighting me with a wound like that?!

ADDANC

Shut up and take your punishment!

Addanc lights into her. Tori fights back.

INT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

The tornado dies down and Cirrus PANTS for breath again.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

I can't keep this up. You have to break them all at once.

AVANI

But I can't do that without a bigger piece of mythrill and I left the ingot in my backpack!

A fresh wave of ants emerges from one of the mounds.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Listen. I can't make my body any bigger, but I can control the flow of magic through it. You can do the same thing with your little square if you just exert yourself!

AVANI

But that's heresy! Taking more magic from the gods than they naturally give!

The next wave of ants gets closer.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

This is no time to be preaching,
just do it!

Avani glances over the ants and the remaining mounds and grapples with indecision.

AVANI

(bites lip)

Great One below, lend me your
power.

Avani kneels and HITS the ground with the back of her mitten.

An EARTHQUAKE hits the clearing. All the remaining mounds CRUMBLE.

The ground repeatedly CRACKS OPEN and SLAMS SHUT, chewing up the armies of suicide ants. PLUMES OF FIRE rise from some of the cracks.

Avani holds her fist to the ground with her burnt hand. The "jaws" continue gnashing off-screen.

EXT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - DAY

Tori and Addanc keep FIGHTING.

The faraway TREMORS hit the village and vibrate the huts.

Kurnung sticks her head out of a large one.

INT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Great rifts OPEN in the ground, rise up, CRUNCH the fallen mounds and sink back down again.

The whole clearing churns with similar chewing motions, minus the ground Avani and Cirrus stand on.

Avani GRIPS her mitten hand, pushes down hard and YELLS OUT in exertion --

Seen from above, the clearing COLLAPSES into a solid bowl.

EXT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - DAY

An EARTHQUAKE hits the village. A wooden shack FALLS OVER.

Kurnung braces herself in the doorway of her hut. The hut wobbles but doesn't fall.

Addanc stumbles --

Tori DECKS him. He falls flat on his back.

INT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

There are no more mounds in the clearing -- or anything else besides Avani, Cirrus and a dust cloud. The cloud BLOWS AWAY to reveal a perfect, smooth bowl in the ground.

Avani GASPS DEEPLY for breath as though she just ran a lap around the Equator.

Cirrus stares at her, amazed beyond words.

Avani keeps breathing. She TREMBLES and holds her mitten hand. The square of mythril is visibly cracked.

Cirrus cocks an eyebrow.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Your square is cracked. No wonder. If it was just your body putting out that much magic at once, you'd be K-O'd or worse.

AVANI

(takes off mitten)

It wasn't my body or this. It was my god working through me.

INT. BORDER FOREST - DAY

Cirrus flies above with Avani on her back, visible through the canopy.

The forest floor is littered with charred ant corpses, blown there by Cirrus's tornadoes.

A small group of dire anteaters hungrily licks them up.

INT. LAKESIDE VILLAGE - DAY

Addanc lies on his back, sweating heavily.

Kurnung's claws cut through his shirt and opens it.

Addanc has a nasty oozing gash in his side.

Tori flinches. Any villagers that can see it either stare silently or recoil in disgust. Kurnung looks grim.

TORI

Necrosis.

KURNUNG

Andy had similar wounds.

TORI

Addanc, you idiot, I'm not sure if I can heal it completely. Let me get my knife and--

ADDANC

--As if you care! Ma'am Kurnung, Tori called the police on our hideout and they killed or arrested everyone!

Tori freezes. Everyone in attendance looks at her. The tension holds until Tori suddenly BURSTS OUT LAUGHING.

The villagers and Kurnung begin SNICKERING.

Addanc's jaw moves mutely before forming words.

ADDANC (CONT'D)

But... she's a useless traitor! I even heard she killed Grampus!

Tori LAUGHS even harder, trying a little too hard to make it seem hilarious. The villagers LAUGH too.

Kurnung smiles and lifts Addanc by the neck.

KURNUNG

That's enough of that. Tori is too useful to betray us and too smart to cross my brother.

Tori's gray eyes twinkle.

TORI
You flatter me, Ma'am Kurnung.
Is dinner at the usual time...?

Addanc glares at her. His expression turns into a painful grimace and he drops his head to the ground.

INT. GUEST HUT - NIGHT

Tori sits cross-legged on one of the beds and finishes eating an apple. Avani and Cirrus take the other, Avani finishing a bread roll. The window reveals a night sky.

TORI (CONT'D)
(mouth full)
Then I got my knife and yanked
the poison out. He can recover
the rest of the way by himself.

CIRRUS
So you actually helped him?

Tori puts her hand over a bulge in her pocket.

TORI
Of course! What do you take me
for?

AVANI
What's that in your pocket?

TORI
His wallet.

AVANI
Tori!

TORI
Hey, this is a rare treasure. It
belonged to the only jerk in the
world worthy of being my rival.

CIRRUS

And that suitcase?

A leather suitcase sits on the floor with Avani's backpack and Tori's duffel bag.

TORI

Kurnung gave it to me. I told her that Grampus hadn't eaten well lately, so she packed it with enough rice and crab meat to last us a few days. You got something to cook it with in that backpack?

AVANI

Solid iron cookware, in fact. Carrying it from place to place was part of my training.

QUICK FLASHBACK:

Back in episode 1, the mob of MAIDS pushes Avani down the hall. Three of them lag behind, carrying her backpack.

TORI

Wow. No wonder you can cause earthquakes.

INT. MEDICAL HUT - NIGHT

The trio's distant LAUGHTER reaches Addanc in the bed of an impeccably clean hut. He's shirtless and his wound is heavily wrapped.

Addanc angrily covers his face with the pit of his elbow.

FADE OUT