

Weapons of the Gods

Grey Foot

*A Tale of the Three Powers Sage
by Rebecca Borgstrom*

The mountain's name is Grey Foot. No birds live there, save one.

The twelve heroes of the city below challenged me this morning. They came to me as I gathered flowers for my tea, saying that I should die for my crimes. They drew blades, and, when I ignored them, scattered the collected blooms. In this manner, they sealed their deaths.

The first three came upon me one at a time, and met their end. Jade Hunger and Falling Storms fought together, as was their way. I bent an old maple's branches to catch their blades and touched their hearts with the point of my spear. Another faced me alone. One, angling for position, broke his leg; I did not deign to fight him. Then Heaven Fire came forward.

He ran towards me, not upon the ground, but atop the blades of grass. They bowed beneath him and beside him, but did not break. His soles touched not the ground. His sword's blade cut through the sunlight and cast it against my eyes. I admired his strength, but still I knew Grey Foot better than he. I struck my spear against the ground and it buckled, a fountain of shattered stone rising before his face. This was my World Breaking form. He put his blade before him and it turned the stone aside, but the blades of grass he stood on shattered and he tumbled to the ground. I moved upon him in the Dragon Wind. The tip of my spear cut into his leg from calf to knee. Crossing his sword and scabbard, he blocked the spear's advance upon his vitals. Then he struck, and I knew the technique's name.

"That is the Sorrow of Iron Phoenix," I said, as I fell back.

“So it is named,” he said. “But how would you know such a thing? The secrets of my blade belong to myself and one other, and you are not she.”

I rose on the wind to stand upon a maple branch. “Leave,” I said. “I will not fight you.”

“I have challenged you for your life,” he said, following me. “If I do not take it, what woman will love me?”

I snapped the limb on which he stood; he stepped to another. “Do you know the meaning of that style?”

“Grief consumes,” he said. “Anger inflames. My heart does not yield to these things: instead, I express their power through my sword. This is the style of the Iron Phoenix, and its first form is ‘Sorrow.’”

He showed it to me again, and I fell back. The maple shivered with the power of his attack, casting off its leaves; they blew past me like a yellow rain.

“I will show you its answer,” I said, and struck. The slap of his blood stung my cheek.

“What do you call that?” he asked me.

“It is the Black Rain form,” I said. “I studied it in the days when the winds above Grey Foot blew fiercely and held the corpses of the birds aloft. For six days, if I walked outside, blood and rotten meat and feathers would pelt me from the sky. Heaven laughed at me, then, I think, but my chi grew stronger.”

“Truly, you are a monster.” He stepped forward, and the air groaned with the power of his blade. “Do you recognize this form as well?”

“It is the Rage of Iron Phoenix,” I said, and parried; and the tree beneath us snapped, and the branches caught afire; and splinters as thick as acupuncture needles sprayed into my arm. Only by grace of the love Grey Foot has for me did I land on my feet and block the next three blows. “Leave now; or I shall answer this as well.”

He shook his head, so I struck. I learned that even a hero such as Heaven Fire can scream.

His face was white as he backed away, and his golden shirt was torn. "What," he hissed, "do you name that, then?"

"It is no technique," I said, "but the power in one's soul that can murder a thousand and turn a land to dust."

"Ah," he said. "It is known you must have such power."

"Is it?"

"When you slew the birds of the mountain," he said, "your arrows turned the sky dark. A pall fell over Grey Foot. One hundred women and children died, struck in their beds by shafts that missed their targets. They were the lucky ones: if an arrowhead just scraped a person's skin, they fell ill, their chi poisoned, and not even our greatest doctors could bring back their will to live." His face darkened with anger. "Here," he said. "You will not resist Iron Phoenix's Hate."

I closed my eyes as he charged. I could see his movements as a glare of crimson even through my eyelids; the light and heat of his heart-fire could have blinded me. Not even my spear could hold back that advance, so I kicked up the corpse of the first hero, Thunder Xu. The body took his sword through the heart; my spear passed over poor Xu's shoulder and nearly took my enemy through the eye. Snarling, he retreated two steps.

"Leave," I said again.

"I have given Thunder Xu a second death," he said. "How can I be content before you join him?"

He raised his sword, and before he moved, I struck. Only with infinite effort did he keep the spear back; he lost his sword to a shiver of my blade and scrambled backwards along the ground, running on his fingertips until the spear slammed down through his hand. I spun the blade, pulled it out, and prepared to strike again; but he called to his blade, and it flew to him. When I dodged out from between them my attack lost its momentum.

"That?" he said, rising shakily to his feet, blade in his left hand.

"It has no name," I said. "But perhaps I will call it Heart Cutter, for in such a way I found it."

"Such a skill does not come from slaughter," he said. "So you must mean your own." He smiled thinly. "But is it not known, you have no heart?"

"Does the Buddha not say, all things are impermanent? A person may know love, and lose it; know virtue, and turn from it; cast aside the heart, and emulate the demons."

"Ah," he said. He stepped shakily forward to enact the Grief of Iron Phoenix, but I showed him the Fury of Emptiness, and he could not move.

"And when such a person wakes up," I said, "and looks up from the bed, and knows the folly and ruin of all things, still the birds have the gall to sing."

In the background, I saw the two remaining heroes of the city quietly backing away—cowards realizing they could not stand before such skills as mine. Perhaps I will hunt them later, and cook them, and eat them with my tea.

As for Heaven Fire, I grant him this: he was strong. He broke the paralysis my form had put on him. He shook it off and took his sword in both his bloody hands. "I am here to kill you," he said. "I will not waver."

"Leave," I said, one last time. "I will not kill Iron Phoenix's student. If I have loved, I have loved her; and if I have never loved, then I can hold no hate for you."

"Your words sadden me," he said. "But death will end your sorrow, and wine will wash down mine."

He moved forward, in the form of Iron Phoenix Bereft. I raised my spear to counter.

It has been two years since the black rain, but I can see a feather tumbling through the sky.