

HEAVEN and HELL (Chapters 6 to 12)

By Tom Ball and Zen Wang

Chapter Six: The Decision



[Behind the Scene: Of Heaven and Hell \(the novel\)](#)

Many of you have seen the title image. Whether it is from my facebook, blog posts or instagram. It is a concept art from a novel I am working on. Exciting news, I am going to post this novel in its entirety on Patreon, to you, my supporters. You get to read the manuscripts and see the illustrations a full two weeks before I release it to the public.

What's more, you get to comment and receive feedback from me on each post. We will have a very interactive experience. We will be writing an epic story together as partners. When the novel goes to the publisher, your names will appear as "Special Thanks". So go ahead, I love all kinds of comments.

Here's a little taste of things to come.

Title: Of Heaven and Hell

Authors: Zheng(Zen) R. Wang and Tom Ball

Genre: Sci-fi Fantasy

Length: 100 Chapters

Logline: On a planet called Olde Earth, after the Age of Magic, descendants of once-powerful warriors must find the courage, strength and unity to fight for their world against an invasion from another civilization.

Prologue

Those who remember still talk of the Golden Age of Magic. When the Olde Earth was plush and green. The land was cared for by a council of wise druids. Nine golden medallions were made from a mysterious core and sent to the nine corners of the land. Powerful warrior kings protected the medallions and looked after the people. The strong protected the weak; The young cared for the old; The fortunate helped the common folk. Magic lived in the blood of the people. Magic was alive in the land. Centuries and centuries passed like dreams on a hot summer afternoon. Dreams aren't meant to last. When the magic wanes, the thunder clouds are close behind.

A full moon hangs on the autumn night sky. A smaller moon sits beside it like a younger jealous sister. Shadow of a night predator flies across the sky. It attacks a crustacean rat and carries it away. It is a giant Falcon Owl. The hunter flies over rivers and forests, villages and castles. People live, laugh and love in this medieval world. The swift predator finally lands in her nest on the ledge of an old temple.

As the young chicks devour their supper, the inners of the temple is revealed. The great hall has nine walls built with black and white fossil rocks. The floor is a splendid mosaic using volcanic rocks of different colours. In the middle of the floor, a vivid depiction of an Unicorn-Pegasus. It is worn by centuries of footsteps but remains resolutely vibrant under the torches' lights.

Old druids dressed in white tunics gather and murmur in hush voices. Suddenly a heavy iron door opens and out comes a tall druid. He carries with him a plate of golden sand. Blood stains were visible on the sand.

"It is true! It is coming! The war council must be summoned."

Another druid pulls a golden ring attached to a rope. A deep bell is heard somewhere above the chamber. As the sound rings throughout the surrounding forest nine hooded riders spread from the tower. They ride like the night breeze on gravel roads that point to the nine corners of the realm of Olde Earth.

(End of Prologue)

After father left, Helmkin would go to the old pine tree by the Olde Horse Road on his birthday. "Maybe he will be back this year for my birthday." He would think to himself. He would dig a hole at the roots of the tree and bury a message to father.

"Father, I miss you. Come back to mom and I."

"Father, we have a new baby goat, come back and see him. I love him. I love you."

"Father, they say you are dead. Come back and prove them wrong."

"Father, I got into a fight today. They say you lost your mind and went to the city of the crazies."

"Father, if you are there, answer me. Remember I am your son..."

Helmkin does not remember when he stopped writing, but he did. He stopped believing in miracles. Father is never coming back.

He still passes by the old pine tree now and then. Every year its branches look a little drier. Every winter its trunks shrink a little lower. It feels like an old woman reaching out, longing and yearning for something she lost forever.

Back at the camp site Helmkin's voice escapes his lips.

"FIGHT!!!"

He stands up slowly and deliberately. He draws his Flametongue with his right hand and holds his Medallion with his left. He waits for everyone's attention before he speaks again with a booming voice that comes from the gut.

"FIGHT!!!"

Seeing the surprised looks around him, he repeats, "LET US FIGHT HIM THEN!!!" His Flametongue glitters and shines in the bright sun. His muscular arm holds it firmly and highly. Soft breeze toys with his hair and cape. Helmkin turns and makes eye contact to his listeners. "WHO WILL JOIN ME?"

Knnuhd stands up and cross his Morningstar with Flametongue as it swearing allegiance. Yingying fidgets but is held back by Santoro.

"Do you even know what you are up against?" Santoro speaks calmly.

"This is our Olde Earth. These are our lives. We ARE free men!" Helmkin becomes animated. "As a son I have the right to find my father. You have the right to your throne. Knnuhd has the right to follow his dream. The heavens demand it. Nothing can stop us. Not the Dark Wizard nor anyone else."

Helmkin stops to take a breath. "We fight for our rights to be free!"

"True, but..." Yingying cuts in.

"No buts! I know what you are going to say. His army is powerful his black magic is strong. I heard them before. One day he may claim all of Olde Earth and all of our lives. But this is not that day. This is before that day. We still have a chance. As long as we are still breathing we have the power to change the future. Your fates are already being written. Either he writes it for us. " Helmkin finishes with a beating of his chest "Or we do it ourselves."

Yingying is visibly stirred up.

Helmkin walks over to the fire pit and picks up a charred brunch. He strikes the brunch on the ground, exposing the live charcoal within. "With strong winds, one tiny spark can alight an entire prairie. "

"You have to look at the reality of things." Santoro refuses to give in.

"The ONLY reality is Freedom! The Freedom to Fight! If you cannot imagine it then maybe you don't deserve it." Helmkin feels emboldened by his speech.

“Death fighter, prince in exile, magical beasts, swords and medallions that talk in dreams. We are not here by chance. It is the will of the gods.” Helmkin continues, “We are meant to fight together. THIS I do know.”

“We are in!” Yingying speaks before Santoro can stop her. That was all Helmkin needed to hear. He smiles at her and gives her an arm shake. Yingying’s face flushes red like fire.

“ARRRGH!!! WORD MUCH.” Knnuhd takes out his pipe, lights it on Helmkin’s charred brunch and bellows out two simple words. “GO EAST!”

The companions get on their mounts and head north east. Knnuhd leads the way. Helmkin and Yingying ride side by side. Santoro rides behind them still feeling raw. "A circus!" He thinks to himself. "A circus on a fool's tour." "But better than nothing." A voice inside him speaks.

A string of smoke emerges from their abandoned fire pit and rises up to the heavens momentarily eclipsing the two moons.

Chapter Seven: Drunken Nights Inn

East Fola is a town like any other. On the outskirts the companions find a dingy, wooden farm house.

This is where all the loggers go for their daily mead. A local waterhole called Drunken Nights. The owner will not care if you brought the Dark Wizard himself to celebrate your birthday as long as you have silver to pay for the watered down drinks. Behind the farmhouse is a rather large barn. A perfect place to house their mounts for the night, away from inquiring eyes.

The companions get a table all to themselves inside the Drunken Nights Inn. They order two loaves of bread, four links of sausages and a mug of hot water. When the food arrives Santoro puts some dried herbs into the hot water. A minty and fruity smell soon arises from it. Yingying quickly dips her bread in it and eats it with her sausage.

Knnuhd wants the cook to fry up some of the delicacies he brought with him, some squid eyeballs, dried Whale liver and seal jerky. He saved them especially for a place with a cooking pot. The cook shouts back: “No! No! No! My kitchen, my rules! Get out you Barbarian!”

Knnuhd lifts his questionable animal parts in protest. "I EAT- YOU NO EAT." Despite his dramatic pauses. The cook does not relent. He whistles and three men emerges from the kitchen holding meat cleavers.

Knnuhd could have taken on five more men, but this is not the place nor the time. He lowers his goodies and stuff them back into his pocket.

Helmkin orders some cheese and bread for himself. He brought all the silver coins from his jar but there's talks that beyond the mountains people don't recognize silvers. *Best be frugal or I will be feasting on squirrels and lizards for the journey home.* He thinks to himself.

Home seems so far away now. Helmkin takes out his rolled up parchment.

"What is that?" Yingying asks with curiosity, still chewing.

"Well, it is a map." Helmkin smiles.

"Pray tell, what is a 'map?'" Yingying finishes her last bit of food and swallows.

"It shows the land on which you walk on- You mean you've never seen one?" Helmkin is surprised.

"Is it like a painting? I've seen paintings before." Yingying slides over to take the parchment in her greasy hands. "Better ones too, if I may say so. Yours don't even have colour."

Helmkin takes it back snappily. "No, a map is not like a painting. It shows you where you have been and where you are going. Most importantly it shows you the way home."

"I know how to get back home without a map." Disinterested, Yingying moves back. "I just follow the Fola River until it meets Finddora River and go east across the Woogang Swamps."

"Fine, but what if you want to go back a different way?" Helmkin's food arrives but he ignores it.

"Well, there is no different way. It is written that following the river is the best way, it's that way for thousands of years..." Yingying does not back down.

“Well, what if you want to find a new way. Or the land changes and you get lost?” Helmkin spreads his parchment. “These lines and dots and letters will show you the way home as long as you know where the sun rises.”

Santoro is enjoying the little argument but too much attention is upon them so he interrupts. “We Koomanichis know the land in our hearts. If home is where we are headed, we’ll get there one way or another.”

Sensing defeat, Helmkin gives up and pack up his map neatly inside a tube of bamboo.

Knnuhd, despite his size cannot hold any mead. After half a mug, he passes out on the table. Nobody is enthusiastic about moving this mountain of a man. Beside his enormous weight, there’s the odour of his sweat. So everyone just waits.

The town bell sounds seventeen times, the inn closes and the cooks go home. Knnuhd still snores away on the table. The innkeeper offers the companions a corner of the dinning room to lay down their heads. They gratefully accept, because no one has to move Knnuhd.

After the last local drunkard stumbles out three moths start a dance around the lonely lantern in the middle of the hall. A skinny boy appears with a broom. He puts the stools on the tables and starts to sweep the earthen floor. Someone whistles and the cleaning boy stops for a second to look around. A shadow jumps in through the window and approaches.

“Any scraps?” The shadow asks. Without waiting for an answer the shadow grabs at the boy’s waist and retrieves two half eaten potatoes.

“The madame is watching closely now. Don’t you come around no more.” The cleaning boy says. His shadowy friend munches like a hungry ghost.

With one potato down the hatch and the second one in the mouth, the shadowy boy burps so loudly.

“Shhhh... we have guests in the hall tonight.” Cleaning Boy sounds worried.

“Are there gurlies?” The shadowy boy asks.

“Never you mind, just finish and get out before the hounds smell your bum.” Cleaning boy beats away some flies. “A bath won’t kill you, you know?”

The shadowy boy's eyes brightens up. "You know who else likes baths?" He swallows quickly. "The Virgin of Ice and Snow from the Shard Castle!"

The cleaning boy giggles. The shadowy boy continues. "Her skin is smoother than white butter. Her face is round like the full moon. Her breasts are pointy and firm like the snowy peaks. Her legs! Oh don't even get me started on her legs!"

"Be quiet! You never saw the Icy Virgin. Don't lie!" The cleaning boy's voice starts to relax.

"Did so! My pecker still grows every time I think about that time. Her bottoms. How round! How perfectly firm!" The shadowy boy turns toward his friend's crouch and makes a grab for it. "By the looks of it, yours does too!"

The cleaning boy falls from the tickling and the two boys play fight on the half swept floor.

In their playfulness they do not notice a large shadow approaching them. The figure towers over them and asks: "Where is this Virgin of Ice and Snow?"



(Shard Castle, a ruin that is surrounded by a large waterfall which is frozen most months of the year.)

End of Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight: Icy Virgin

It is Helmkin who stands over the two boys.

The cleaning boy is frightened out of his skin. The shadowy boy is scared as well but his years on the streets made him calm.

"Who wants to know?" He eyes Helmkin up and down with his beady eyes.

Some time later, Helmkin finds himself standing on the forest edge nearing a pristine lake. Full moons shining above.

In the sky, a dot grows in size and picks up speed. As it gets closer, Helmkin sees the silhouette of a giant eagle appearing against the moonlight.

As the eagle glides toward the pool, a shape appears on its back. It is a rider. The person points a bow and releases. Before Helmkin can comprehend what is happening, an arrow is firmly lodged into the tree beside him. The eagle rider calls out in a voice that is neither male nor female: "Leave the sacred pool. Her royal highness is approaching."

Incredible! Helmkin thinks to himself. *What accuracy from mid air.* He walks away, almost bumping into a tree. After twenty paces Helmkin takes off his boots and clanking belt and trousers. He hangs them on a tree branch and circles back to the pool now that he is much quieter.

On the shore of the pool, the rider and eagle land. Rider walks over and retrieves the arrow from the tree trunk and puts it in a gold gilded quiver. Then with a smooth and graceful movement, the rider takes off the helmet and shakes loose a full head of long golden locks of hair.

Back in Drunken Nights Inn, Santoro wakes up and notices Helmkin missing. He quickly discovers the cleaning boy and his friend sharing a jar of mead Helmkin gave them as payment. "Where did Helmkin go?" Santoro demands. "Hahaha, you want to see the

virgin too?" the cleaning boy is too drunk to take notice of Santoro's severe face. Luckily his little friend has more sense. "To the icy pool, just follow the path out back till you come to a clearing."

Back at the pool, Helmkin is enjoying the sight of the mystery rider from a low bush. She is an exquisite blonde beauty with slender and graceful body. She wears a thin layer of white satin tied at the waist with velvet golden ropes. Her skin is like porcelain under the soft moon light. Her hair is dancing quietly like the waterfall in the far ground. She walks with an air of divine elegance.

For once, the stories are true.

As the beauty approaches the pool, her velvet rope comes loose. The satin sheet flows down her round shoulders and breasts like fresh snow on lake ice. Firm breasts with pink tips; soft and bouncing buttocks; long and slender legs; glowing and flowing blonde hair. At that moment, nothing could dissuade Helmkin from believing a goddess has flown down from the heavens.

Helmkin cannot take his eyes off her. This heavenly creature bathes in the mirror pool. Helmkin wants to capture and ravage her then and there. He feels a deep illogical, primal desire to tear up the perfect serenity of it all.

Helmkin feels ashamed but remains frozen in his helplessness. He stands there in trance, watching the nude beauty, listening to his own heart pounding, bewitched to the very core.

After what seemed like an eternity, the beauty walks to a smooth rock. Millions of shiny water beads flow down from her hair and glide on her silky skin. Having tasted loveliness, the water beads return to the pool in a shower of fleeting diamonds.

The beauty sits on the rock in a way that makes man groan and purr.

Two fireflies approach. The female lands on the beauty's toe and the male dances around and flashes. The female insect surrenders to the magical flashes and replies with her own. The male quickly mounts the female and the pair flies away in their tandem mating position.

Watching the vanishing dots of flickering light, the blonde beauty suddenly sobs out of control. Her body convulses rapidly. Large tear drops streams down her perfect cheeks

and lands into the pool, breaking the divine tranquility. The perfect reflection of her vanishes in waves of concentric circles. Just like that, the moment is gone forever.

Deep in the woods, Santoro loses his way. He stumbles around until he notices something shiny in the distance. It is Helmkin's belt buckle hanging on a tree. "Strange." Santoro thinks to himself and keeps walking toward the closest clearing.

By the pool, Helmkin's legs takes him closer. He dips his bare toes in the water. The ripple travels on the smooth water surface for eternity until finally it reaches the beauty on the other side. She looks up as if waking up from a dream of a thousand years. With incredulous feline agility she flips backward to her weapon and fires with automatic reflexes.

The arrow lands inches from Helmkin's left ankle, stopping him in mid stride. The beauty locks gaze with Helmkin. Helmkin is threatened but feeling unafraid. The beauty is naked but feeling unashamed.

Helmkin continues to walk toward her like a moth drawn toward a flame. She raises her bow again. Loaded with a fresh arrow, he knows she never misses but he keeps on walking. She takes aim at his heart.

Something shines back at her from his heart and momentarily blinds her. It is a flash of gold. A medallion around her target's neck.

She hesitates. Her fingers hold the bow string steady.

Instead of firing she whistles twice.

A shadow glides across the water. The beauty grabs her satin shawl and weapon and flips onto her giant eagle. Four powerful flaps and they lift off.

She knows he is watching but she does not look back. He knows he may never see her again so he does not take his eyes off her.

Long after the shadow of them disappears, Helmkin keeps watching the empty sky like a child waiting for candy rain.

Finally, he takes his eyes off the sky and notices something closer. A velvet silk rope hanging on a branch. He takes this souvenir from the beauty and ties it around his own waist.

The leaves rustle and the trees move. Santoro jumps out of the trees, startling Helmkin.

"Going for a night dip are we?" Santoro hands Helmkin back his belongings.

"Ah, yes, but the water is freezing. I don't want to catch a cold." Helmkin quickly dresses.

Helmkin and Santoro walks in silence back to the inn.

"You were worried about me?" Helmkin speaks first.

"Ha! No! I am too young to be your parent." Santoro dismisses it. "I just don't want to waste time looking for you in the morning."

Back to silence. Helmkin reviews the bathing beauty into his mind. He blushes.

"So did you see her?" Santoro asks joltingly.

"Who?"

"The Icy Virgin."

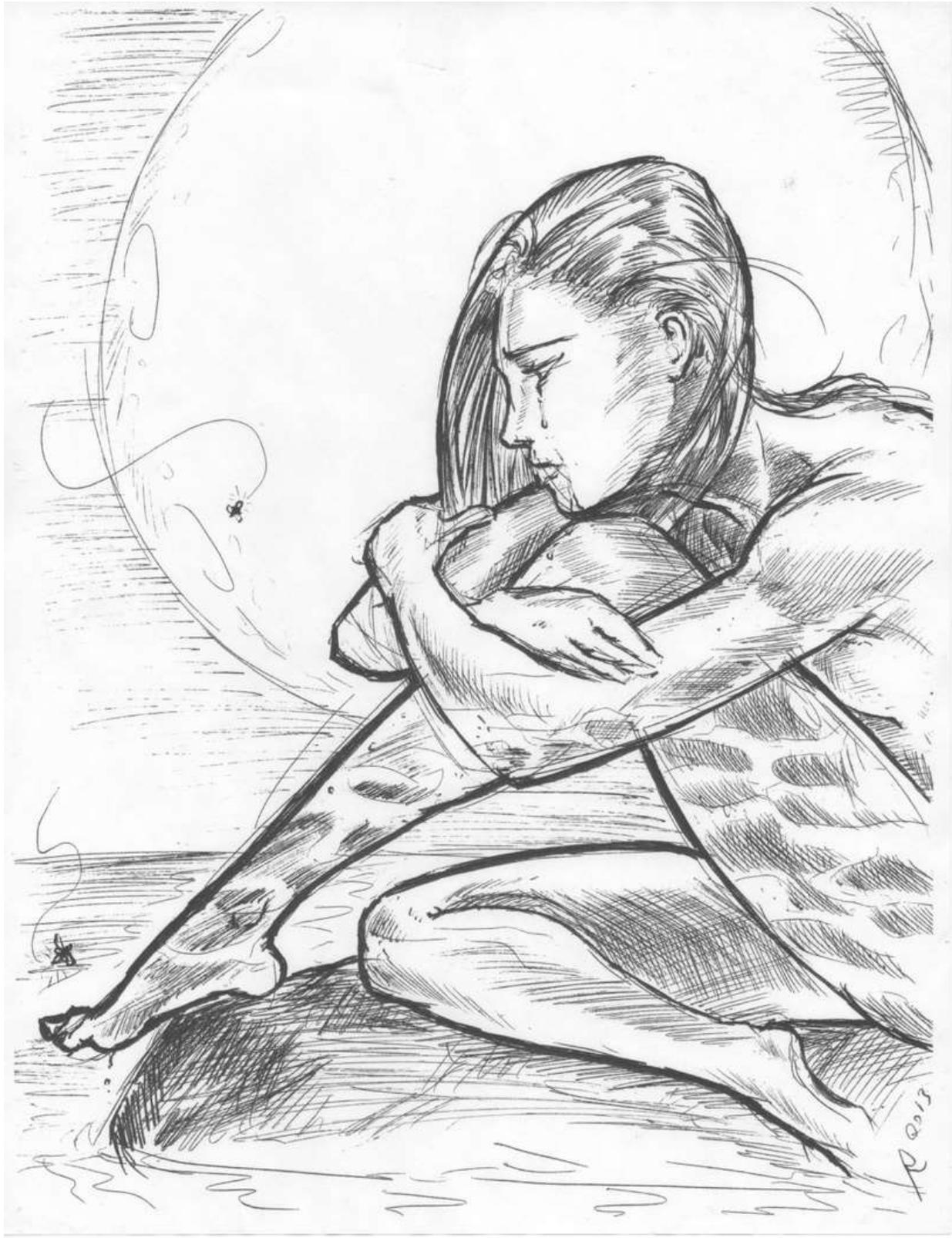
"No, Wait what?" Helmkin breathes rapidly. "You don't believe in those boy's fancy stories do you?"

Santoro seems unconvinced.

"No! the only icy beauty was my cold butt hanging out like the moon." Helmkin chuckles.

"Haha, a sight for sore eyes indeed." Santoro laughs.

Discreetly, Helmkin touches the velvet rope around his waist with his thumb. A warm tingling feeling washes over his body as if he is falling in love for the very first time.



End of Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine: The Dream

Back at the inn, Helmkin leans against the earthen wall, his face lit by the dying fire. Two large hounds curl up near the hearth, jealously protective. Helmkin rolls down into his blankets. Moments later, sleep overtakes him.

Right away he senses something different. In his dream he is chilled to the bones. A castle made of ice floats in the night sky. Helmkin walks on the balcony marvelling at his surroundings. A reflection moves within the ice. It is the virgin beauty.

She glides toward him, unflinching. He looks down and sees his naked body. He looks back up and sees that she is also nude. He approaches her, cautiously at first then more forthright. She teases him with playful evasions.

When they touch a tingle is felt at the tips of their hearts. He caresses her golden hair while she runs her fingers up his muscular shoulders. He smells her neck and rubs his nose on her ear. His warmth invades her frigid skin. She allows the sweet ache travel down along her spine, savouring every instant. She pulls him in.

As blood pumps through his popping veins he grabs her buttocks like a hungry beast. Her soft and tender flesh submits to his male strength.

This is only a dream. No harm no foul. Helmkin reassures himself. He looks around cautiously. To his horror, Lilithe stands in the corner, his lover from Vale Greene. Her long dark hair draping down toward her feet. Her sunken, moist eyes spell hatred. When he tries to focus on her, she melts away.

Meanwhile, the virgin tilts her head and closes her eyes. Her rose bud lips invite kisses from the sun. He licks her cool, smooth neck with his sizzling tongue. They mingle in a whirlpool between their bodies. Their tongues taste like mountain springs, sweet and pure. Warm bliss wraps the couple in a timeless blanket.

She slows him down. She guides his right arm in between her thighs. He can feel her opening, moaning, wetness escaping. Her eyes rolling backward in ecstasy. His finger tips travel up and down her valley of pleasure. Each time deeper and closer to the cave of mystery. Until finally she lets out a "Mmmm" and arches her back in pure unquenchable desire.

She pushes him down. Icy floor is now lined with fluffy white snow.

She uses his chiseled body like a marble statue. She takes her pleasure without acknowledging his presence. She rides like a master disciplining her wild stallion. The stallion feels pain, excitement, exertion and ecstasy all at the same time. Sensual explosion.

When he cannot bear any longer, he pushes her shoulder down. He gets on top of her white satin skin and her golden wavy hair. He arches his back and spreads her thighs. He lunges at her like a beast devouring its prey. His unshaven chin and his edgy teeth braising her body. The rhythmic pounding on her hip bringing her higher and higher toward the summit.

After what feels like a lifetime, the steady tremors finally pushes her over the edge. She screams and rolls her eyes back toward her skull. Soon their bodies are filled with raging, tiny fireworks everywhere. They are drowning in each other's essence.

They close their eyes and cool washes over them. When their eyes are open again they are two white whales rolling in the blue gray waters of the south. The two hold on tight to one another. Currents push them through a narrow channel full of fluorescent vegetations. The tips of aquatic fauna brushes against their sensitive skins and gives them another climax. Together the two whales squeal and surface for air. "There she blows!" A distant voice shouts and a hundred harpoons land around them. The sea erupts in anger.

Now they are in a dense fog and feel as light as a feather. Wind twirl them around and they are two mating dragonflies. She leads the way while he holds on to her tail. Their translucent wings beat perfectly in synch. As they glide through the meadow and forest they gain speed. He pulsates steadily with his stomach. The slow burning rhythm gives them another blissful peak, forcing them to land on a tree. A large slimy tongue flicks at them. They narrowly escape a large chameleon in camouflage.

The tongue shatters tree branches and a thousand golden leaves fall. They spiral down like trapeze dancers. The lovers are now two tree tigers. The female is in heat and moaning in agony. The male smells her scent and salivates uncontrollably. She moves higher and higher until the branches are too thin to support their weight. Thorns open his skin but he feels no pain. For she is the only prize on his mind. When there is no more branches to climb she turns around and hisses at her suitor.

He is emboldened and lunges at her, avoiding her sharp canines while getting a good solid bite at the back of her neck. She loses her balance and is pushed back. Their weight snaps the branches and the two tigers fall to the ground. Soft, long summer grass catches them and he quickly mounts her from behind. She moans and hisses in protest, baring her canines. He exerts his dominance with love bites along her spine. Eventually she relents and allow her body to relax. They connect in wet and warm ecstasy. Over the horizon, the blood red sun sets on a prairie of rising hot air. Shadows of hunters and spears dart around the perfect scenery.

Helmkin wakes from his inner dream to an outer dream. In this dream, there are two bubbles floating in space. Each bubble is made of millions of speckles of light. The lights shine and dim with the heartbeat of the rider inside. The colour of the lights changes according to the rider. Helmkin lies in an orange light sphere while the Virgin lies in a blue light sphere. They float happily, gazing at each other. Their bubbles touching.

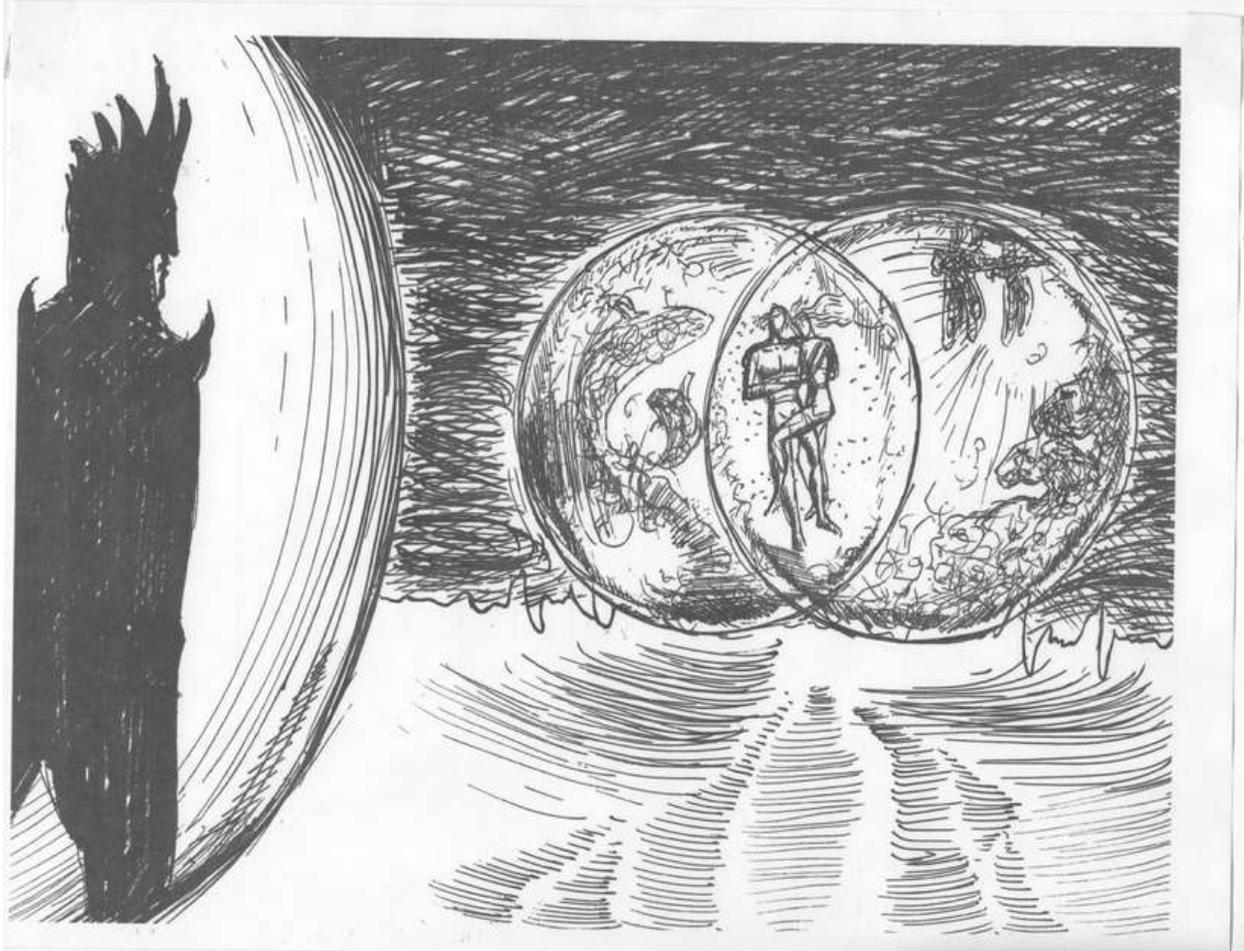
Out in the distance, there is a dim third light sphere. The rider inside is a tall figure wearing shiny black armour and a raven black cape. On top of his head is a crown helmet made of dark crystals. The dark observer takes in the scene through his narrow eye slits.

For reasons unknown, Helmkin turns and catches the voyeur in hiding. Before his eyes can focus, the dim light sphere bursts and vanishes like a reflection in disturbed water.

In a cold marble palace a man wakes up on his throne. He looks down to his gloved right hand to reveal a golden medallion in his palm.

Back in Helmkin's dream, an underwater volcano erupts and sends burning lava up to Helmkin's buttocks. Helmkin feels a hard kick. "HIA! GO TIME!" Knnuhd's rough voice never sounded so abrasive. Helmkin is torn away from his blissful dream to face a grumpy Knnuhd.

Reluctantly Helmkin rises to his feet. He notices a curious thing: he was holding the medallion when he slept. *Maybe I should hold on to it more often.* Helmkin thinks to himself and smiles.



End of Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten: The Stone Bridge

Another day's march and they come to the village of Stone Bridge. The Bridge, of which the village is named after, spans the Fola River Valley. After this crossing they will be on the fertile flood plain of the mighty Olde Sage River. The going should become easier as there are more towns on the route. The farms are supposed to be full of animals and grains. This according to Yingying's scroll.

Yingying's traveling pouch is full of surprises. Of the most curious is a silk scroll. By reading this scroll, She is able to know the local customs, village history, regional foods and which route has the most need for fine garments. When Helmkin pressed, she said she "borrowed" the scroll from a silk merchant's reading chamber.

"He won't need them now. He's old and wrinkly. No time to read between his fourteen and a half wives." Yingying justifies her action.

"A Half?" Helmkin is intrigued.

"Oh, that half is me, I was his fifteenth bride but I ran away on the wedding night." Yingying answers nonchalantly.

"Yingying, one of these days, we are going to have a long talk by the fire." Helmkin shakes his head at this seemingly innocent girl.

"STONE BEEGE!" Knnuhd announces their arrival at the seventh wonder of Olde Earth.

The Bridge is showered in the morning sun. A giant arch formed by one hundred sixty solid pieces of volcanic rock, it is a marvel to behold. No decorative railings, no relief carvings of angels or demons. Just a hauntingly beautiful and timeless arch over the Fola Valley. It connects two sides of Olde Earth that was separated by the gods since time immemorial. The arc is a reminder of men's defiance.

The narrow construction means only a single person can cross at a time. Local custom dictates that the rider rings the bell at his end. If he hears no reply it is permissible to cross.

Wind in the valley is strong all year round. Two oil lanterns are installed at the midpoint of the bridge. If one of them is extinguished then you must dismount and walk across. If both lanterns are extinguished then traveller best head back to the village and wait for another day.

On this day, no flames can be seen.

Santoro suggests going back and ask the villagers whether it is safe. Knnuhd says he does not feel any wind and therefore wants to cross. Helmkin is undecided. When they look around for Yingying, she is already halfway up the arch on the back of her Wolf.

"Wooooow!!! Slow down Ying!" Santoro shouts after his wild sister.

She pretends not to hear him and Fenix charges at full speed. Yingying stops for a moment near the lanterns. "They are dry! That's why they are not lit." she shouts back to the group. The rest of them feel a moment of relief.

Yingying keeps going. The beauty of the landscape captures her. It is autumn, a million shades of bright yellow, fiery orange and deep reds are taking over the forest like a slow burning fire. The morning mist that rises from the valley below looks like smoke. The sun pierces through with its familiar brilliance, adding to this fantastic illusion.

Santoro chases after his sister. The two get into one of their arguments. It ends with a shout and a slap across the face. Yingying cries. Fenix barks and snarls.

"I'd better go over there." Helmkin steadies his Myrolie Dragon and gives it a gentle kick.

Helmkin decides to walk across. A sudden gust starts and the dragon flinches. By the time Helmkin made his way to the centre point the wind picks up. His cape and hair is thrown around like in the head of a storm. Helmkin keeps his head down and yells back at Knnuhd: "Stay there!"

Knnuhd mistakes it as telling him to hurry. He gathers the chains but the Rhyno refuses to move. Knnuhd gets angry and slaps the its back. Rhyno moans and moves in circles. Knnuhd can hear the wind getting stronger. The leaves are fluttering and the brunches are bustling.

Knnuhd picks up a twig and beats the beast across the back. The Rhyno moves away cowering but defiant. Knnuhd mounts it by force and is determined to have his way.

Helmkin barks something else but all Knnuhd can hear is the howling wind.

Knnuhd tugs the chains harshly and kicks the Rhyno. No movement. He kicks again and beats it with the twig. "COWARD!"

The Rhyno bolts. Five tonnes of muscle and fur moves like a mountain in an earthquake.

The surprised Knnuhd holds on for dear life and enters a race with the wind. Helmkin and company cannot see Knnuhd on the climb but they all cheered when they finally see him appearing at the top of the arch, barely holding on to his Rhyno.

The wind is as strong as a hurricane now and it is trying to flip Knnuhd off his beast. Knnuhd knows that he can probably get off the Rhyno now and crawl across the rest of the bridge. *No, not in-front of my new friends. Even the girl rode across.* He thought to himself.

Knnuhd rides with his head down and hugging the Rhyno like it was his mother. The strong wind forces the Rhyno against the stone lantern for support. Knnuhd becomes pinched between the rock and his beast. The pain makes him loosens his grip for a brief moment. That is when the wind flips him over.

The rest of the group watch in horror as Knnuhd tumbles over the featureless railings, grasping at the smooth surface. Knnuhd's body spirals from the Stone Bridge down to the foggy valley. His deep chested scream trailing him all the way down.

Helmkin is in disbelief. Yingying later recall hearing a loud whistle. Santoro claims he saw a shadow in the dense fog. What all three agree is that they could not hear Knnuhd's landing.

Did he hit a river? a swamp? or was the wind simply too loud? Everyone wants to go down to the valley but none thought it too wise to attempt until the wind dies. All they can do is to wait and feel rotten and helpless. No one even notices the rider-less Rhyno finally makes it across. Its fur looking bare where Knnuhd's fingers held on.

The wind eventually dies down. The forest becomes quiet again. Suddenly, Fenix the Mountain Wolfe barks at the trees behind the group. This was followed by a sudden gust of air. Then, a large blackness blocks out the sun. When they look up they see a large body suspended in mid air with a pair of wings behind.



End of Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven: Talisha

The large shadow continue to descent slowly and threateningly. Helmkin's hand is on the Flametongue. The Magical Sword shines bright blue in the morning sun, signalling another enchanted beast is approaching.

That beast is a Mega Golden Eagle. Its enormous talons hold Knuhd's meaty shoulders while its tent sized wings flap powerfully. In the midst of this whirlwind Knuhd is dropped on to the ground with a thud.

Yingying is the first to run over. Knnuhd is disoriented and flustered but his heartbeat is strong. All of his hair are standing up, making him look like a scared porcupine. Without warning he throws up his breakfast. Yingying nimbly jumps out of the way to avoid the splashes.

“First time flyer. He’ll be fine.” A pleasant female voice comes from behind the eagle.

The “Icy Virgin” from the night previous is on the eagle’s back. Fully clothed in a golden wire armour and a feather crown, she walks slowly toward the companions. She glances at everyone and finally land her gaze on Helmkin and the velvet robe on his waist. She blushes and looks away.

Knnuhd notices his bloodied shoulders.

“Next time do not struggle so much.” The Icy Virgin says coolly.

“NEXT TIME!? NOOO NEXT TIME!” Knnuhd says grudgingly as he kisses the ground one more time. Yingying wrestles Knnuhd's hair down with her little ivory comb but it gets stuck in greasy knots. Knnuhd yelps in pain and tries to stop Yingying. He spins around and falls down again. Everyone laughs.

Helmkin takes the opportunity to approach the virgin. “Thank you for saving our friend. He is not good with words but I know he is very grateful.”

“No need to thank me. MoonRyder nabbed him out of instinct. His mother must have outstanding favours from the gods.” The Virgin tries to hide her unease.

“I am Helmkin, what do they call you?” Helmkin notices.

“They call me many things: Lady of Ice, Snow Witch, Icy Virgin and many things I don’t care to repeat.” The Virgin replies.

“Then I saw you the other night at the Mirror Pools?” Helmkin goes straight to the point.

“No, that would have been my twin sister. I would NEVER be so frivolous as to bathing in plain view of a commoner.” The Virgin looks away.

“So- she told you? About me? I wanted to apologize. I didn’t mean to intrude.” Helmkin’s heart beats faster.

“Nothing to apologize for. All men are alike.” The Virgin snaps at him.

Now Helmkin is the one feeling uneasy. He looks down at the ground.

“You are lucky to have walked away unharmed. She must have liked you.” Virgin turns around. “For what reason I CANNOT begin to fathom.”

“Uh, Yes, she WAS looking at this.” Helmkin shows his medallion.

The Virgin is startled at the sight of Helmkin’s Medallion. A moment passes then she retrieves her own golden medallion from her chest.

Two pieces of gold shine in the late morning sun. The back of them are identical with ancient runes and triangular patterns. The front are decorated with a unicorn-pegasus. Helmkin’s Uni-Pegasus is prancing while the Virgin’s is galloping and looking up.

“That is incredible.” Yingying interrupts “She has one too!”

Santoro and Knnuhd gathers for a closer look. They take out their own for comparison.

Yingying stands in the middle, admiring all the magical medallions.

“Galloping, Prancing, Kicking and Standing. The Unicorn-Pegasus have different stances. However, the triangular flower on the back and the runes are exactly the same.” Yingying observes. “A most excellent mystery.”

“This is why I followed you.” The Virgin says.”I had intriguing dreams last night.”

“Of what? Revenge? Quest? Lost father?” Yingying is in her face like a fly on ham.

“Yeah”The Virgin’s cheeks are rosy red “something like that.”

“You must share it with us.” Santoro presses.”We are all gathered here to find out the meaning of our dreams.”

The Virgin shakes her head in silence.

Yingying cuts in. “My brother dreamed of a throne. Helmkin here dreamed of his lost father. Furry brute there dreamed of glory in battle. What is yours? What are you supposed to find?”

The Virgin looks at her medallion and finally looks up and answers: “LOVE.”



End of Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve: Newcomer

The Virgin stands in front of the group. Four pairs of eyes undresses her down to her bones. Vulnerable and afraid, she stands like a white marble statue. All she has left is her sadness, loneliness and sweetness.

“In my dreams an old lady told me that I would find the meaning of true love, if I went north.” The virgin explains.

The companions look at each other without knowing what to say.

Santoro cannot take it any longer."Look lady, thank you for saving our friend, but we are not going on a leisurely trip to visit our grandmothers. We are going to do something very important and dangerous."

"My dreams told me that also." The Virgin interrupts.

"Then why do you mock us so?" Santoro is visibly upset.

"I, I..." The Virgin starts to lose her voice. She takes a deep breath and tries to collect herself.

"You do not belong here!" Santoro blares out.

Yingying gives her brother the hairy eyeball. "What about me? I don't even have a medallion." She goes over to the Virgin and puts a hand on her shoulder. "She has a right to be part of us. The medallion chose its wearer."

Knnuhd brushes his Rhyno, wanting to say something but does not know how.

Santoro takes Helmkin aside. "I do not like it. She is going to stir things up. She'll bring bad luck."

"She brought Knnuhd back." Helmkin replies. "That's got to account for something."

"Women always spell trouble, that's why they are not allowed to sail with men." Santoro insists.

"We are not on a boat so we are free to send her away at any time." Helmkin tries to be diplomatic.

"...and Love? What is that?" Santoro replies.

"We don't know what she's really after. I bet she will open up in time." Helmkin finds himself unwittingly taking sides.

Santoro looks at Helmkin with disgust. "You are bewitched."

Helmkin looks surprised. "Keep your voice down. I just think she deserves a chance. She IS the bearer of a medallion. I mean Yingying is a woman and she did not create trouble."

“My sister is a child, not a woman. And she will remain so.” Santoro eyes Helmkin.

The two men look back at Yingying and the Virgin. Yingying is brushing the eagle’s shiny coat of feathers and talking to it softly.

“Besides, an Eagle Ryder is quite handy to have around.” Helmkin steals a glance at Santoro.

Seeing his sister finally bonding with a woman gives Santoro comfort. He finally softens. “At the first sight of trouble we send her packing.”

“I promise.” Helmkin gives a reassuring handshake.

They walk back to the Virgin to deliver the news.

That night there are five around the campfire. Yingying sits next to the virgin. Much to her disappointment the newcomer remains distant. Santoro tends to the fire and the food. Knnuhd chews loudly. Helmkin sits opposite the newcomer trying hard not to stare.

“How about telling us where you found that medallion?” Yingying passes the pheasant and wild leeks stew to the newcomer.

The newcomer nods as she receives the soup bowl. “I did not find it. It came to me. It came to save my life.” She buries her face into the food and silence fell on the group once again.

Knnuhd picks up the cauldron and drains the last drop of the soup. Then he fills the fire side with the sweet aroma of smoking leaves with his pipe.

Yingying finishes her food and takes out her flute and plays a melody. The moon covers everyone with her grey blue blanket.

After the music, the newcomer wipes her moisten face and walks over to Yingying. She whispers into Yingying’s ear: “Talisha”

“I beg your pardon?” Yingying is perplexed.

“Talisha, that means ‘I am thankful’ in my native tongue.” The newcomer manages a slight smile.

“Oh, you are welcome.” Yingying smiles back.

“That is also my name.” The newcomer grins.

“Oh, that’s a beautiful name, Ta-li-sha. Yes?” Yingying is happy to make a new friend.

Talisha nods. Her face is not used to smiling so even when she does it, there’s a thin cloud of sadness to it.

That night, five bodies huddle around the glowing embers. Yingying breaths happily and Knnuhd’s snores. Their beasts settle down around them in a concentric circle.

Helmkin holds his medallion in his hand. Helmkin wonders what will he dream about tonight. Despite what he said earlier to Santoro, sleeping next to Talisha makes him uneasy.

Mercifully dreams draw him in. Lightness opens up in dreamland. Helmkin is flying. The landscape looks familiar and then he sees the Stonebridge. Following the valley he flies toward the north until the valley end. After crossing a mud plain delta he arrives at a white beach. The sand is like sugar beneath his feet. He sees a long set of footprints in the sand and he follows it. The sun shines on the endless beach with blinding brilliance. Suddenly a voices comes from the sky.

“BATTLE!”

“What?” Helmkin turns around in search of the voice. All he sees is the bright sun, the white sand and shiny waves.

In the morning when Helmkin wakes up, he finds traces of wetness on his cheek and hair. He must have cried in his dreams.



End of Chapter Twelve.

AUTHOR BIOS: Tom Ball is Cofounder and Senior Editor at FOTD. He lives in Ontario.
Zen Wang is a filmmaker, director, producer, graphic artist and the IT Editor at FOTD.
He lives in British Columbia.