



Heaven and Hell—Chapters 13-21

By

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Editors' Note: *The Why We Like It* note, Authors' note and author bios are with the first installment of the novel Issue 9 (Fiction)

Chapter Thirteen: To The White Beach

“The old folks say ‘To dream is to die’. For you are free in every sense except the sense of body. Without your body death is no longer to be feared. Looming in the dark unconscious there is something more fearsome than death itself.” - Chronicler of Storm Tower.

The companions quickly dispatch breakfast and packs up for the road. This is when Yingying asks an obvious question: Which route are we taking? The general direction is north by north east to the Dark Wizard’s Kingdom of Iron. However, there are several possible routes. They can pick through the forest over Duranglian’s Ridge or they can march close to the bay of Lonely Islands. The third option, which no one wants to entertain is a harsh trek straight through the desert of Crescent Moon.

Yingying’s stolen silk scroll favours the forest path, for it gave shelter from the seasonal rain.

Helmkin tightens his brow. “This may sound somewhat strange, but I vaguely remember a dream that showed me a route along the coast.”

Silence.

Helmkin senses that the group’s reluctance: “Yes, it is ridiculous. Right then, let us head for the forest.”

“NOOOO!!!” one can never get used to Knuhd’s booming voice. “MI DREAM!!” Knuhd looks straight into Helmkin’s eyes. “WHITE SUN WATER!”

“Endless sandy beach. Crashing waves?” Santoro follows.

Helmkin feels as if he is still dreaming. He swallows to moisten his dry throat but there is no liquid left in his mouth. He has a hard time forming words.

Yingying helps out. “What are you saying? Did you all have the SAME dream this time?”

Finally, after a sip from his goat belly canteen, Helmkin says: “I was flying past the valley and the mud plains. Then I landed on this white sand beach with blinding sunlight. Then there was a voice. I cannot remember the exact words...”

“This is the Site of Battle.” Talisha finishes Helmkin’s sentence for him.

“Precisely.” Helmkin confirms sheepishly wondering if she was in his dream again.

Yingying is wonder-struck. She goes around to confirm the details of everyone’s dream.

The more she found out the less sense it makes.

All the medallion bearers dreamed of a white sand beach during the previous night.

Some of the details were sketchy but all agree the beach is to the northwest of their present location. All can agree there was a voice telling them about a fight or big battle.

The differences are also mystifying.

On the white sand beach, Knuhd saw a glorious tomb, where pilgrims placed offerings.

On Santoro’s white sand beach he saw a carcass overran by red ants.

On Talisha's beach she saw a beautiful poem written in the sand with twigs, but before she could read it a wave washes it away. All she remembers are two words -- "Lay" and "Way".

Helmkin told them of the long, endless footprints he followed on the beach.

Four dreams. One destination.

Now there is no clouds of doubt. To Battle, To the White Beach.

The group ride swiftly for the next five days, stopping only to feed their animals and themselves. Wild games are plentiful and the weather is dry and sunny. The going is easy and upbeat. Each night the same dream comes back.

The White Beach Awaits. The Heroes are On Their way! To Glory! To Freedom! To Peace and Love! They travel on the enchanted beasts carrying pure hope and destiny. Their hearts are filled with much curiosity, a sense of adventure. There is also a touch of fear like a mild toothache one hopes will pass with time.

To Heaven or To Hell they know not, but one thing is for certain - There will be no regrets. Companionship, Adventures and Dreams, what more can one ask for in a lifetime?



Chapter Fourteen: Direction

Six days later, the companions arrive at the edge of the Sage River Delta. The scenery matches the dreams of the medallion bearers. In their dreams the White Beach is not far beyond the flood plains.

After making camp the girls find a quiet spot by the river. Yingying undresses and plunges into the frigid, refreshing water. "Us islanders are half fish." she quotes her brother.

Talisha steps into the water more slowly. In the orange glow of the half-submerged sun Talisha looks positively divine. Her golden hair flows like fine silk banners seductively shielding her goddess-like body.

Yingying stares, which makes Talisha blush.

“Have you being with a man?” Yingying asks. Talisha pretends she didn't hear and quickly washes herself.

The sun descends another few more steps, the girls sits naked on the grass to dry off.

“I know one thing. Whoever takes you to bed is a very lucky man.” Yingying continues her probing.

“What does a wee girl like you know of the business?” Talisha dismisses her.

“I know enough. I was almost married once you know?”

Talisha gives Yingying a disbelieving look.

“I also know how they look at you.”

“Who?” This peaks Talisha's curiosity.

“Who do you think? The men, all of them. Knnuhd, my brother and Helmkin.” Yingying turns and sits up. “They try to hide it, but I can tell. They all want to lie with you.”

“Stop your foolish talk.”

“I am serious. You can have any man you want. Fortune always smiles on ones like you! I am hopeless.”

“That is not true. You are beautiful too.” Talisha comforts her.

“I will never be a lady. I have rough hands. I walk and laugh like a boy. My brother says I snore and burp like a fisherman too.” Yingying pucks her lips and hugs her knees.

Talisha chuckles. “One day you will find the one who will appreciate a fishy burp.”

“Have you met your mate?”

Talisha shakes her head.

“Then what hope is there for me?” Yingying looks at her reflection in the water, tugging her wet hair and trying to bundle it up.

Talisha chooses silence over more comforting words.

“I do not even know why I am here.” Yingying continues. “The gods did not summon me with dreams. I have no medallion nor an enchanted beast.”

“What of Fenix?”

“I had him since a pup. Snatched him from a hunter’s snare. He’s just a big brute.”
Yingying throws a stone into the stream. “Do you really think our direction is true? I cannot help but feeling foolish some nights. Like a blind man lost in the forest.”

Talisha thinks for a moment then says: “Let me show you something.”

Talisha takes out a bundle and unwraps it. It is a piece of square cloth with several colourful rocks in the middle.

On the clothe there are faint, intricate patterns. Talisha carefully adjusts the cloth while looking at the sky. She chants a strange poem. The circles and lines remind Yingying of a sundial she once saw in the garden of monks.

Slowly, Talisha matches the rocks to their colours on the perimeter of the cloth dial.

“Any child knows Olde Earth is made up of The Nine Realms: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Sand, Air, Earth, Man and Woman. But do you know that thousands of years ago, the Olde Order commissioned nine pillars to be built, one in each corner of the realm. The rocks they used to build them are taken from deep within the bowels of Olde Earth.”
Talisha picks up each rock as she talks. “These are taken from the ruins of those pillars.”

Yingying can see that each one has a distinct colour and texture. Some are translucent and shiny while others are dark and majestic. Some have a slight glow to them while others seem to absorb light like a sponge. They are all magnificent and mysterious. Together they shine like the colour wheel under the sunlight.

“They are as powerful as they are alluring.” Talisha smiles and reaches into her bosom and takes out her medallion. She dangles it in the middle of the rock circle. It swings like a pendulum in the breeze. Then something inconceivable happens. The medallion starts to spin. First slowly then rapidly. First in one direction then the opposite. A deep and eerie hum accompanies the magical movement. After several minutes it slows down. And then it stops entirely.

Seeing this, Yingying crouches on all fours like a child, mouth wide open, eyes unblinking. Timidly she touches the gold coin with her finger. It is quite warm to the touch.

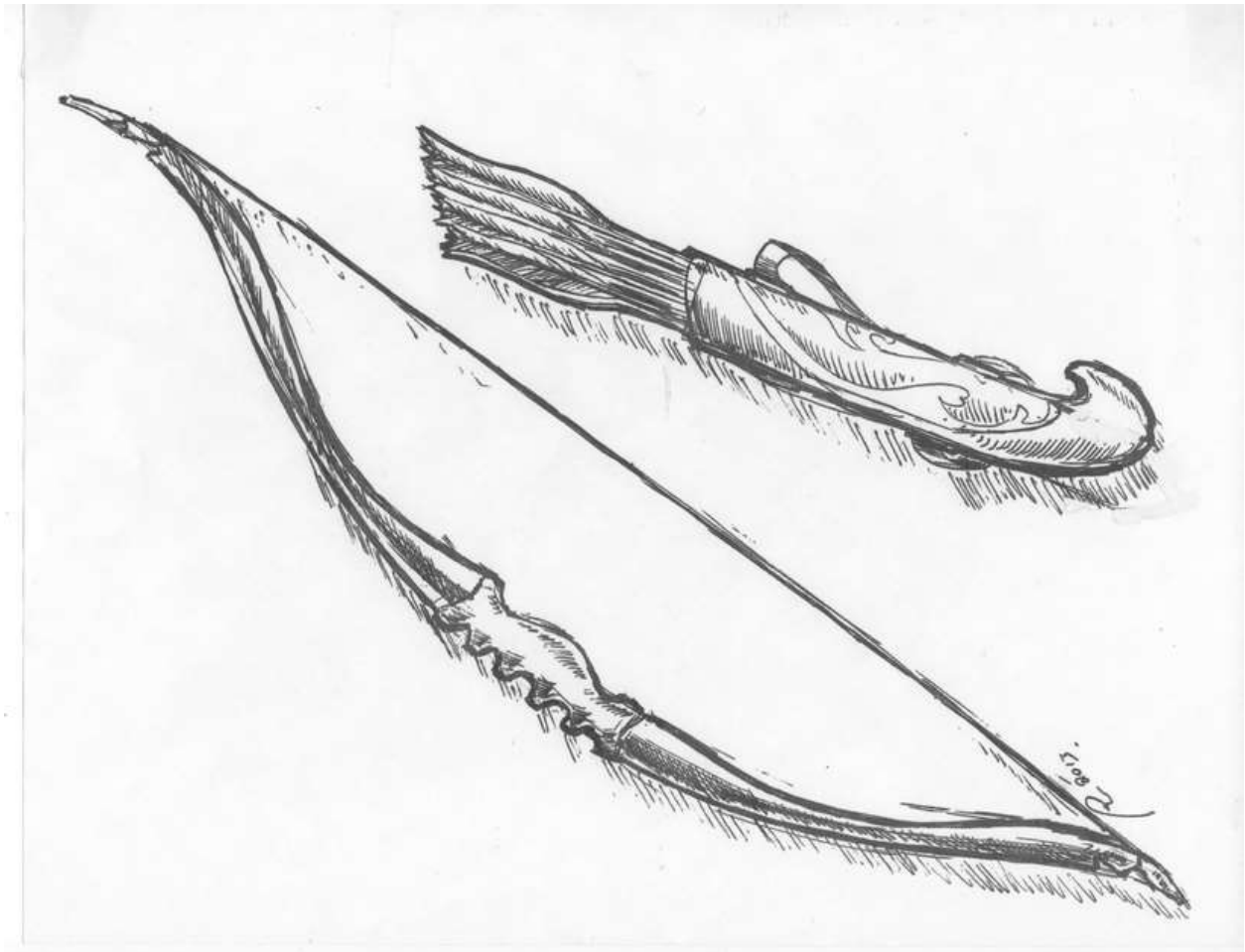
“Now try to move it.” Talisha gives permission.

Yingying nudges the coin to one side then the other, but the coin always returns to the final resting position. “How are you doing that!”

“The Olde Earth has spoken.” Talisha smiles. “Now, see the direction of the horn.”

The Uni-pegasus' horn is pointing northwest, to the Realm of Sand.

Talisha puts the medallion back on to her long neck and smirks. “You didn't think I joined



your group for the rustic campfire cooking did you?”

Yingying sits back, breathing deeply while taking it all in. Over the coastal forest, the last rays of the dying sun peeks through. Flocks of songbirds hurrying over it to return to their nests before the nightfall.



Chapter Fifteen: Witch

After a half day's march, the companions arrive at the edge of a sandy beach. The beach stretches for as long as one can see. It is not white and bright as in their dreams but all agree this must be the place.

"I bet it will be brighter when the sun is at the top." Helmkin unloads his blanket. "Let's camp there tonight." He points to an old mangrove tree standing alone on the otherwise featureless beach. It looks like a crumpled old warrior left behind on a battlefield.

Suddenly Yingying yells: "Come and take a look at this!"

A small gravel mound is twenty steps away from the tree. It is nothing more than a small mound surrounded by a circle of stones. An old tree branch is stuck in the middle. It is strangled by tattered ribbons and dry vines. Fenix the mountain wolf notices a set of footprints going toward the grave. There is no prints leading away from it.

Night falls on the white beach. Knnuhd and Santoro gather whatever driftwood they can find. Since it is not enough, they start to hack off the limbs from the old mangrove tree.

Suddenly, an old hag materializes out of nowhere.

The hag is ancient and crumbling as the tree. She has braids decorated with sun-bleached fabric. The rest of her body is adorned with hundreds of trinkets. When she walks she sounds like a toy seller. She limps along with the help of the brunch from the gravel mound. A shaman of the old religion.

Without any warning, the old hag beats Knnuhd with her stick. "Away! Away! Animals and Leeches!" Her voice is sharp and abrasive as the sandy gale that is gathering around them.

Knnuhd blocks her blows and raises his own axe in protest, but all of a sudden a sharp pain originates from his chest and radiates to fill his entire body. With a loud scream, Knnuhd falls to the ground and loses consciousness.

Weapons drawn, the four companions surround the old hag by the tree. Unsure of what dark powers does she possess?

Quite unexpectedly, the hag drops to the ground and starts to laugh like mad. "Dead, Dead, Men and Beasts. Fled, Fled, Devil's Feasts."

No one dares to approach except Talisha. Cautiously she lowers her bow and bend down to the mad woman. The hag backs away. "Away beauty, away fame, do not touch a dead dame."

Helmkin gestures for Yingying to check on Knnuhd. He then points Flametongue toward the hag and demands: "Who are you and what is it that you want?"

The hag looks at Helmkin's sword, then his eyes. Her face softens momentarily. "Want want till I die; rolling in the waves you and I." She looks pensive, as if remembering some passing sweetness.

Yingying reports back: "His wind is knocked out of him, but the heart beats strongly."

A night hawk screeches overhead. The hag jumps and resumes her chant. "Dead, Dead, Men and Beasts. Fled, Fled, If to Live."

Helmkin remembers he has not seen Santoro for some time. Just then a shadow moves past him.

With a forward flip and a flash of metal the shadow strikes at the hag. She screams for her life and a white smoke envelops the grounds. The dense smoke makes eyes useless while sounds of chopping and screaming comes from within.

Finally the smoke subsides and Santoro stands where the hag used to be.

"The old fox got away. Cheap tricks!" Santoro shields his EastBlade in disappointment.

Yingying can't believe what she saw: "San! Were you going to kill her?"

No answer.

"She's just an old lady!" Yingying beats Santoro in the chest.

"Lady she is not." Santoro points at the unconscious Knnuhd.

"Even so, she did not kill anyone!" Yingying screams louder. "Knnuhd is alive!"

"Not from a lack of trying." Santoro pushes past Yingying. "I recognize Dark Magic when I see it." Santoro kicks at the hag's cane. Yingying sees that they are now chopped in half.

By dinner time Knnuhd recovers. Unsurprisingly his first words were "HUNGRY, KNNUHD"

Yingying holds on to the hag's broken cane at dinner time, disobeying her brother's repeated order to burn them. *Dark Magic lingers*. Santoro warns her.

“What do you think she is?” Yingying asks no one in particular.

“Dead! If I see her again.” Santoro grins and looks at the men in the group. Knnuhd nods in agreement. Helmkin does not acknowledge.

“Her chanting is strange.” Talisha joins the conversation unexpectedly. “In the olden days, the druids would chant riddles to one another if they suspect eavesdropping.”

Everyone waits but nothing more comes out of her. “Well, that is ALL I know.” She says apologetically.

“Only one way to tell.” Santoro steals half of the hag’s cane from Yingying and sticks it in the fire. “A Druidess is nothing without her staff.”

Yingying goes to save the stick but Santoro holds her back. She screams and struggles with Santoro while keeping her eyes on the cane. In her heart she hopes to see a miracle. She wants to see the cane unharmed by fire or turn into a snake or a hundred butterflies. But the old branch just burns like the rest of the wood pile.

The next morning hot sun visits the white beach. It now looks exactly like the beach in the companions’ dreams.

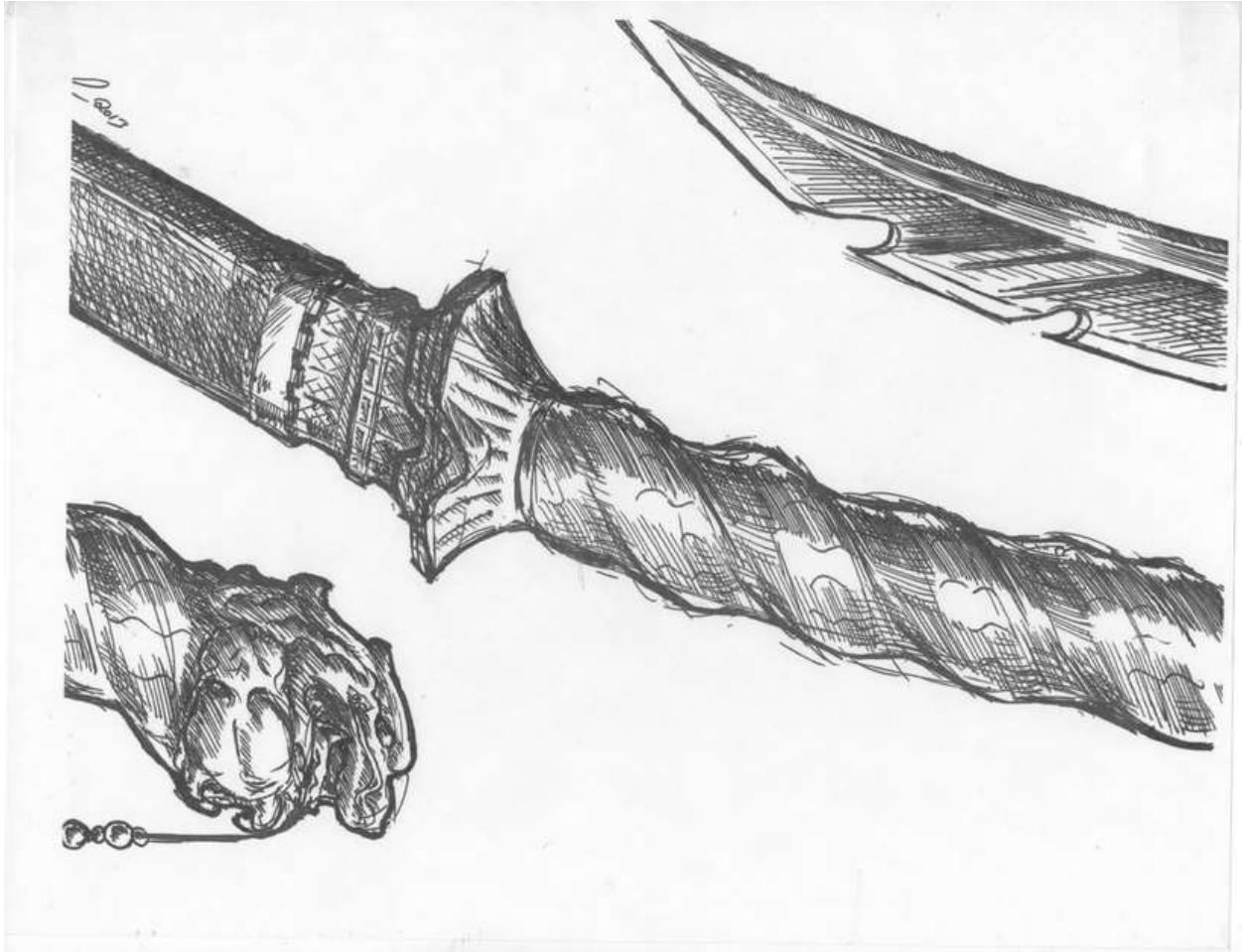
Before Knnuhd has the chance to light his morning pipe, Yingying’s voice is heard. “Come! Look! Come!”

The companions gather around her. By the fire pit the half burnt cane became a sprouting sapling. green leaves and tiny branches squeeze out from the seemingly dead wood.

Santoro is unimpressed. “Green leaves are no use for the fire.”

“No! Look! On the bark!” Yingying pushes Santoro’s face toward the cane.

In the daylight, the cane looks polished. There are fine engravings on the surface. Even Santoro has to admit that the engravings look exactly like the runes on the back of the golden medallions that brought them here.



Chapter Sixteen: Run

This is the Site of the Battle! The haunting voice from the dreams echoes in everyone's heart.

This is when the companions realize they do not have a plan. Who is the enemy? Which direction will they come? How many are there? Too many questions. Not enough answers.

You cannot shoe a horse without the animal. Helmkin feels ridiculous.

Out of nowhere comes a light murmur. Yingying looks around and finds the old hag crawling near the mangrove tree. She is on all fours muttering to herself and looking for something.

“What are you looking for? Old Grandmother?” Yingying’s sweet voice startles her.

“My eyes, I lost my eyes.” The hag whimpers.

“I have not seen them, but I have these.” Yingying shows the broken cane she kept for her.

“MY EYES!” The hag exclaims in excitement. She grabs the broken pieces, licks them on the severed ends and joins them together. The two branches start to sprout. New leaves and vines emerge intertwine with each other. Within a few moments the cane is completely regrown together by twines and vines.

The hag found new life in herself. She swings her cane aggressively as she jumps backward like a cactus crab and lands on top of the mangrove tree.

“Fools!!! I tried to warn you in vain. I can only hope the last ship of your lives has not yet sailed.” The hag’s voice solemn and heavy.

“Mind my words this time! For they won’t be uttered trice.” The Hag steadies herself and faces the companions. “I am going to leave my body and you are going to run away from the beach. Do not stop for anything until you reach the grassy hill to the east. Dig on that hill and you will find life. Do it not, and death will catch up with you. ALL OF YOU.”

“Who is coming? But we are supposed to fight here!” Helmkin tries to make some sense out of it. The hag has spoken and her eyes are wide open, scanning the watery horizon.

After seeing the hag’s powers, even Santoro is helping Yingying rolling up the blankets. *Better to believe it now than regretting it later.*

“I will fly ahead to find the hill.” Talisha is the first to take off.

The companions hear a thump. The hag’s body collapses near the mangrove branches. Yingying wants to run to her. Santoro interjects. “Do not stop for anything, remember?”.

A storm gathers on the ocean like a blackened net.

Santoro picks up his EastBlade and sticks it in his belt.

Distant thunder can be heard.

Knnuhd climbs on top of Rhyno.

Large drops of rain starts to fall. Whirlwinds toss sand and dry leaves around on the beach.

Helmkin tightens the harness on his Myrollie Dragon.

Lightning strike, thunder claps. The beasts roar and growl.

The morning bonfire is already doused by the rain and scattered by the wind. Ride! Ride! Ride! The companions take off with haste.

The sand storm is blinding. The clouds block out the sun. The sandy beach turns into a muddy puddle. It is impossible to keep the group together, let alone finding a hill. An eagle's screech is barely audible beyond the dunes. Helmkin's Myrollie Dragon answers with his own calls. This keeps the group somewhat coherent.

After what seems like half a candle's time the companions gather on an elevated knoll. Is this it? The beach it is unrecognizable. Everything is underwater. Violent lightnings strike the old mangrove tree repeatedly, setting it on fire. The hag is nowhere to be seen.

"Look!" Santoro points to a stick on the sand hill. It is the hag's cane. No one asks how it made its way there. Knnuhd uses the handle of his MorningStar. Helmkin pommels the sandy clumps with his Greatsword. Yingying and Santoro directs their animals and digs with their hands. Everyone shudders when the sound of the lightning strikes closer and closer.

After some time they finally hit something in the sand. A large metal ring, too big and heavy for anyone to lift with one hand. The ring is connected to another smaller one, and then another. It is a chain. Everyone pulls but it does not budge. They tie their mounts to the chain and crack their whips. After some teeth grinding effort the chain starts to slide out of the sand. Slowly and painfully the sand gives away and a large structure emerges.

It appears to be large pieces of lumber tied together with leather straps. Ten giant tree trunks make up a flat square.

“A Doorway!” Yingying shouts excitedly. “There must be a tunnel or a passage!” She starts to dig underneath.

Knnuhd wipes away sweaty sand from his forehead. Behind him, the waves are jumping higher and higher. Some of them are two huts high. He knows something bigger than nautical wind is at play.

“NO DOOR.” Knnuhd brushes Yingying away like a bird. “RRRRAPHDDD!”

Yingying cannot understand.

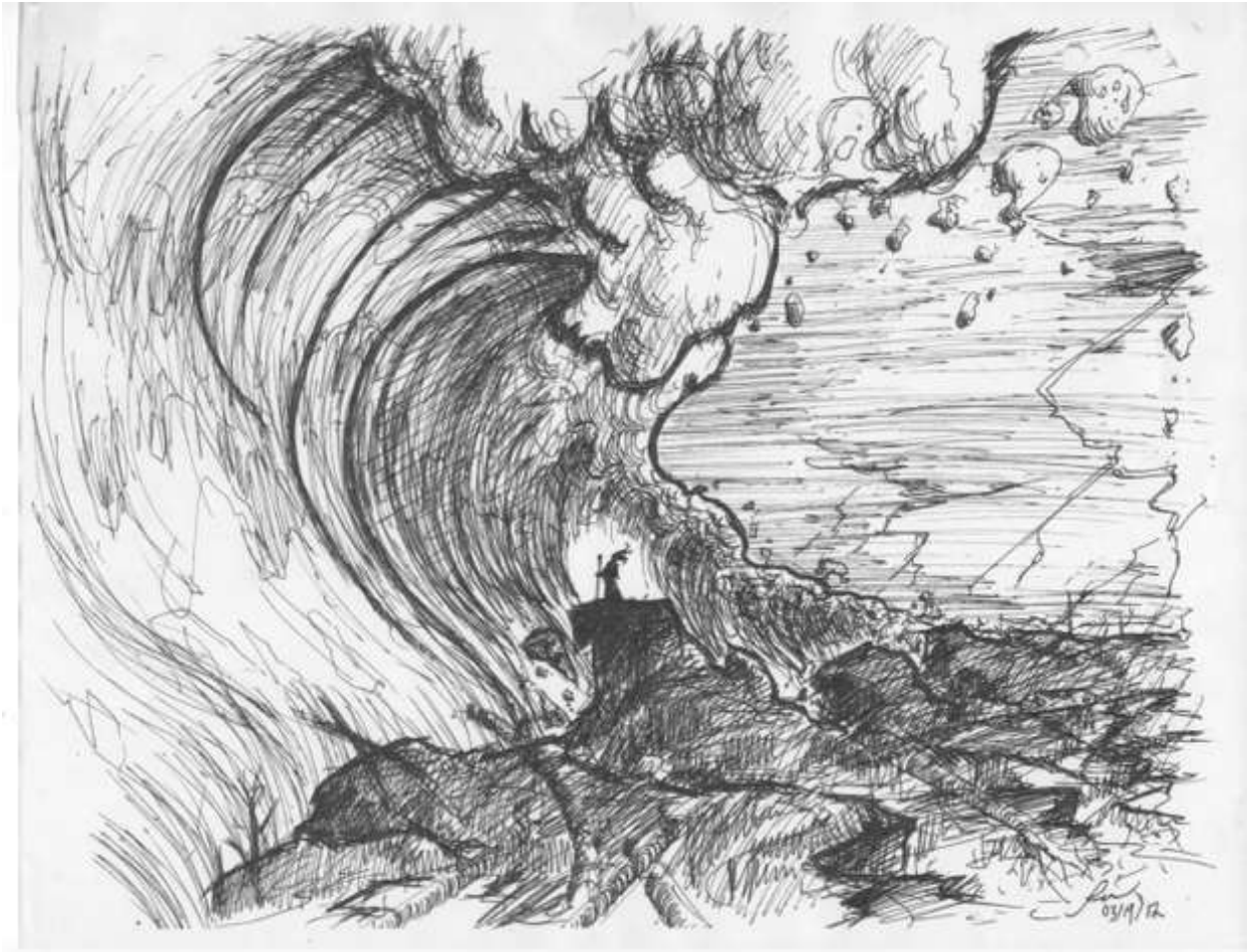
“RRRRAPHDD!” Knnuhd raised his voice and brushes away the remaining sand.

Santoro stops Knnuhd: “What are you saying?!”



“He says it is not a door.” Helmkin look at the angry waves. “It is a raft.”

Chapter Seventeen: The Wave



The downpour makes a watery grave for all earthly crawlers. Exodus is everywhere. Scorpions and meerkats; mice and snakes; lizards and beetles all form endless lines of fleeing. Predators and preys run side by side from the imminent doom.

The companions tie their bundles onto the raft and leave the beasts unrestrained. That way if the raft overturns they will have a fighting chance.

Talishia lands with her MoonRyder and cries out: “Look!” A faint white line can be seen dividing the ocean and the sky. It grows thicker every second. Accompanied by a loud booming roar.

“Minansoom!” Santoro drives his EastBlade into the sand.”The Last-Will Wave. Villagers back home scribble their will and tie it to a large rock.” No one moves. Knnuhd murmurs a few prayers in his mother tongue.

They can see the wave is as high as a small mountain. An endless wall of water. Rumbling, rolling, crushing towards them. Everyone braces for impact. Holding on to whatever they can.

Suddenly, a point of light flashes in the north. It is the hag. On a piece of crumbling earth she is only a stone’s throw away from the wall of water. Facing the wall she stands tall and unyielding. Her twisting and dancing hair making her more like an angry lion and less like a crazy hag. Her charms jingle like a hundred rattlesnakes ready to strike. She chants an ancient spell. Her voice booms across the land. It is deep as a war horn and high pitched as a canary.

With each verse she tears a piece of her charm off and throws it at the waves. The waves light up in bright blue as if been set aflame by a ghost fire. The water freezes and immediately explodes into small chunks of ice. The ice evaporates into thin air with a cloud of steam. In this way, entire sides of the wave disappears. But new waves are forming just behind.

The companions hold on to each other and the raft. The beasts form a tight ball in the middle of their wooden sanctuary. All except the Eagle.

Talisha rides MoonRyder in circles above. “Come down!” Helmkin and Yingying beckons her. “Save your strength.” Talisha and MoonRyder circles a couple of times, then Talisha yelps and the two fly toward the beach.

MoonRyder struggles with the storm. The gusts pushes it around like a tumble weed. Finally it reaches the muddy island where the hag is barely standing.

“Come!” Talisha reaches out to the hag in the middle of another chant.

The old woman turns toward her without breaking.

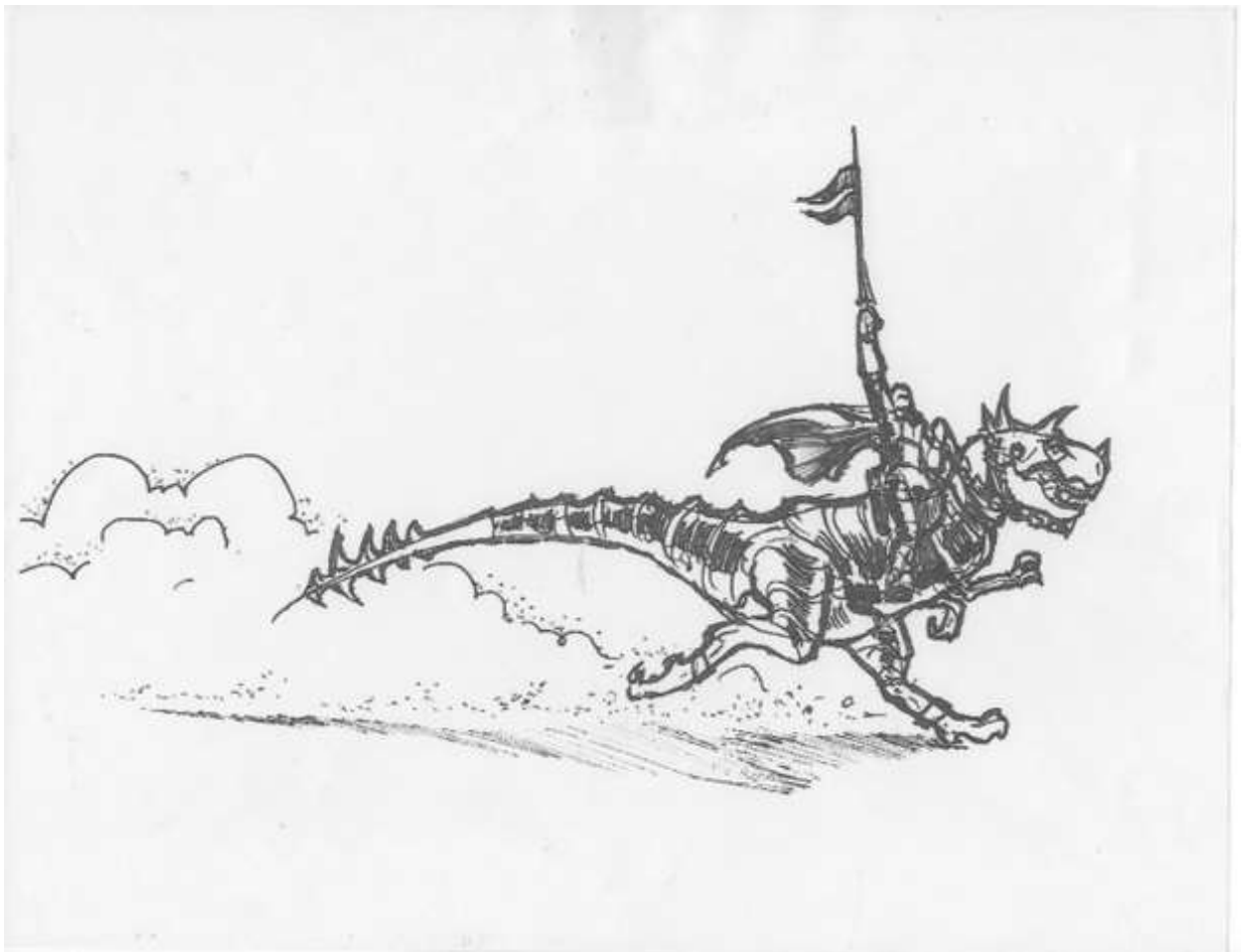
“Hurry!” MoonRyder makes another unsuccessful effort to land. Only a handful of charms are left hanging on the old woman’s sagging breasts.

Talisha gives up trying to land and goes for an aerial snatch. The old woman pushes the eagle away. Talisha comes around and reaches out her own hand. This is the closest she is able to get her. She sees her face clearly.

An old, weathered face full of wrinkles and sun spots. But it is a face of love, tenderness and contentment. An old cripple at the moment of her demise. Yet she embodies more spirit of hope and strength than the rest of the world combined.

Talisha retracts her empty hand.

The old woman tears the last three charms all at once. She whispers to Talisha as she glide past her. Even with the maelstrom around them, Talisha heard the words loud and clear --- “GO, GO TOGETHER!”



Chapter Eighteen: Whalestar

Death cannot be denied forever. It is a serpent that has to be fed. The tidal waves crush and roll toward the sandy hill like a horde of lusty bandits, devouring, destroying and devastating everything in its path. Five unfortunate souls and their animals stand on a feeble raft, bracing themselves for the inevitable doom.

Yingying sees the wall of waves and imagines her own bones being crushed by it. For the first time in her life she thinks of death. That cold, dark, cruel, mysterious eventuality. Nana says it comes like an executioner armed with razor nails. It rips your chest open and suck out your life forces. Others say it is a bottomless pit infested by demonic bats and scorpions. They chew on your body as you fall, forever and ever toward the blackness.

Yingying stops her thoughts. *Just Breathe*. Her nana used to tell her when she had to be patched after her fall from the slippery roof tiles. *Panic is a snake, if you let it in it will never leave*. This is not helping. She wants to hold on to something solid and heavy. Yingying looks around. She finds the safest thing and grabs it without thinking.

Knnuhd turns around to find the curious little eastern girl hugging his left leg. “UUUUH?” He rumbles. Then he feels something he has not felt for a very long time - warmth and tenderness seeps through his hairy legs and touches his heart. A little girl is wet with fear and has chosen him for protection.

Her tears roll on his skin and her breath chases them down. Her eyelashes tickle the back of his knee and her hair brushes against his calf. Knnuhd’s leg is frozen with sensations. He dare not move a hair. His own heart quickens and a pressure is building in his groin. The lump starts to grow. *NOT NOW!* Knnuhd grabs on to a piece of wood and tries to think of other thoughts.

HMMMMMM... WARM HOG SAUSAGES LAMB LEG ROAST PICKLED BUFFALO TONGUE DEER BLOOD PUDDING ...

Not helping, Yingying’s warmth is penetrating deeper and deeper. The scent of her flowing hair is now invading his mind. The Wild Beast within screams and tugs at the crumbling chain. The ground shakes. The mountain moves. The sky tumbles down. Knnuhd grabs Yingying by the waist.

And then the wave hits.

The world first turns white, then blue, then black. The earth first go up, then down, then nowhere. Silence surround them. The raft is tossed like a toy boat.

Nana was right! It is like being ripped to shreds while falling...

Immeasurable time passes and the next thing Yingying feels is a faint beat, then another, then another. It gets stronger and stronger but also more painful. *Are the bats chewing on my legs yet?* Interestingly the bats sound like her brother: "Idiot! I told you to hold your breath and close your lungs."

When she opens her eyes Santoro beats on her chest a couple more times. The intense pain makes her cough and throw up seawater and sand. Yingying regains consciousness and sits up to a world unrecognizable.

Water, water, everywhere. She sits in the middle of a vast ocean. Overlapping waves pushes the raft around but with much subdued vigour. The sky is starting to settle and the sun is trying to breakthrough. Rain has stopped and seagulls are quacking overhead looking for easy meals after the storm.

Santoro and Helmkin are throwing ropes into the water and shouting things. Fenix and Kirin are licking themselves. Talisha and her eagle can be seen gliding just above the choppy water.

Yingying goes to the edge of the raft to wash her vomit off. A gigantic mouth full of sharp teeth suddenly comes up from the water and splashes her. It is Helmkin's Myrollie Dragon. It seems perfectly within its elements and is swimming gracefully with its giant tail. *We still don't have a name for it yet.* Yingying thinks to herself.

By lunch time all the animals are accounted for. "Has anyone seen Knnuhd?" Helmkin suddenly becomes aware of his absence. "I saw him swimming toward Rhyno moments ago." Santoro replies.

Rhyno is sitting in the centre of the raft panting and sneezing. Knnuhd's big head is hanging on a tree branch floating beside the raft. He looks half-dead.

Helmkin calls for his Myrollie: "Dragon! Get Knnuhd!" The dragon dives and swims toward Knnuhd. Its big tail splashes everyone and almost tips the raft. "What a brute!" Helmkin complains.

“WhaleStar, his name is WhaleStar.” Yingying touches Helmkin’s muscular shoulders and whispers.

Chapter Nineteen: Rose and Hummingbird



“I shall make my claim. Come forth, oh Ye weary of heart and spirits. Dive in my body from whence thou came, death or enlightenment shan't be far.”

---Ancient engraving on the statue of The Sea Mother.

The companions drift on the endless ocean for three days and three nights. Food is plentiful. The Myrollie Dragon, now named WhaleStar and MoonRyder are excellent fishers. Sardines, eels and even large tunas are regular fares. One afternoon they bring up a sea turtle. It was a female laden with delicious eggs. Knnuhd’s lips are moist as he sharpened his dagger. He flips the turtle and takes aim at the belly.

“NOOOOO!!” Yingying grabs Knnuhd by the arm. “Leave her be. She is a mother.”

“MOTER? NO! FUD YES!” Knnuhd is confused.

“I shan’t let you. Go have some fish. GO!” Yingying hugs the belly up turtle, putting herself in-between them. Knnuhd walks away with disappointment, sheathing his dagger.

The turtle gradually stops struggling. Yingying massages its belly and gently flips it over. She washes the dried blood on its shell with sea water and sends it off into the water.

“You were talking to her weren’t you?” Talisha sits down beside Yingying. Yingying nods and feels a sense of warmth toward this sister she never had. Together they watch the turtle disappear into the deep blue.

On the other side of the raft, Knnuhd is deboning a piece of Mahi Mahi. A spine pokes his finger but he keeps going without noticing.

Another three day passes by. Santoro and Helmkin are anxious. They believe the current is towing the raft further into the sea. Their suspicious are compounded by the fact that WhaleStar refuses to go into the water. Groups of SharkEels swim around them. Waiting their turn at a meal.

For distraction, Yingying takes out the old witch lady’s cane. “We should have a service for the old lady.”

“Who will have a service for us?” Santoro jeers.

“She rescued us. We owe her this.” Yingying refutes.

“Fine rescue this turns out to be...” Santoro walks away muttering.

Yingying lays the cane on the centre of the raft.

“To the remembrance of an old lady by the sea.” Yingying starts her speech solemnly. “We do not know her at all, not even her name.” Yingying feels a strong emotion. “But two things are for certain. She is a powerful lady and she saved our lives. We give thanks for her final act. She exchanged her life for ours.”

“Oman Koonie Ashnam. To the spirit of the ancient one. Accept her soul and welcome her to your fire. Let her stand by the great tree. May she be sheltered from the eternal

cold. May her face be graced with your gentle breath. May her heart return to the source of all things. Oman Koonie Ashnam.” Yingying closes a soft kiss on the head of the cane.

Next, Yingying sends the cane floating into the sea. She gives it a gentle push. As soon as it touches water, a leaf sprouts out. The leaf grows at an extraordinary rate and is as large as a person’s palm in no time. The ocean wind blows it back toward the raft.

“THAT’S IT!” Santoro shouts out beside Yingying and runs away. Before long he was constructing a mast and sail out of a piece of driftwood and torn clothing.

After everyone leaves Yingying retrieves the cane and she discovers something even more astonishing. The veins on the leaf are connecting to spell out words.

“Runes are beyond your reach still, so I will write in the common tongue.” Yingying turns the leaf over. Nothing. She rubs with water. Still nothing. Eventually it falls off the branch. Then a new leaf sprouts where the old one fell off. The new leaf is filled with different words.

“I shall tell you about a flower. It is called ChrysentalumRose, common in the northern realms...”

Whenever a leaf is read it falls off and the another one grows in its place.

“As the flowers petals wither they do not fall off. They hang below the flower like hair on a woman. If it rains during the night a fungus will latch on to the dead petals. The fungus will spread up toward the flower.”

“The fungus attack the healthy plant. Then a battle ensues between the parasite and its host. There is no telling which side will win.”

Yingying desperately wants to read on, but lunch is called. She is not ready to share her secret with anyone yet so she hides the cane beneath her pouch.

At lunch Santoro says he constructed a makeshift mast and rudder and everyone should help in building the sail. He wants blankets, pelts, ropes, waist belts, rugs and anything that will catch wind.

Santoro is ecstatic when the sails catches wind and pulls the raft along. When Helmkin asks how does he know which way to go he says: "Against the current of course! Any child knows that the current always pulls you toward sea after a Mynamsoom."

Night falls, without their blankets Yingying and Talisha huddle together. This closeness is something they have not felt for a long long time. The two women embrace and caress each other and falls into a blissful stupor.

On the men's side Helmkin and Knnuhd are shivering individually, back to back. Knnuhd's cut from a few days ago is now infected and filled with pus. He hides it from others and only uses his left hand during the day.

Santoro keeps watch of the wind and continuously adjusts the ropes and his makeshift rudder. With almost superhuman strength he sails the raft through the night.

Dawn was a welcoming sight for all, but especially for Yingying. She is anxious to read the next leaf. After breakfast she got her chance.

"The ChrysentalumRose will either die or live depending on its own strength. The same goes for the fungus. If you help the flower by cutting off the dead petals then entire fields of flowers would be lost"

"For the Rose would lose its ability to fight parasites. The dead petals serves the flower even in death. It weeds out the weak and allows the strong to live on."

Yingying is disappointed. She was hoping for a glimpse into the magical world of the old witch. But instead she is been given a lesson in botany.

"It took me a long time to realize the truth. But we are like the ChrysentalumRose. We need dead petals to keep us strong. In this way, the Dark One is the dead petal and he comes to destroy us with his fungus-like black magic."

This is getting interesting. She tears off another leaf.

"If you are reading this then I have already joined my ancestors. My only wish is for our flower to carry on and survive the Dark One, so that we can have Peace, Love and Freedom on Olde Earth once again."

“Take this cane to Monastery Hill. The head abbot will reveal the secrets of the Dark One. You have the strength for victory. If you ever doubt, just look at the Roses of the North”

Monastery Hill! Yingying’s heart is pounding with excitement. She runs toward the back of the raft and bumps into her brother head on.

“No running on deck!” Santoro collects himself.

“You were running too!” Yingying fights back.

“Well I have important news!” Santoro announces. “I just saw a hummingbird!” He makes it loud enough for everyone to hear.

“What does it mean? Is it an omen or something?” Talisha asks.

“No, it just means we are close to land!” Santoro answers with a smile.

Chapter Twenty: Knnuhd's Jewels



Santoro’s sail works, but no one is ready to admit it. He lines up the raft according to the sun's arc and tweaks it continuously throughout the day. Gradually, more signs of the

coast shows up: A broken squash ladle; a wooden toy horse; broken wagons and other debris.

An apple tree floats by the raft. There are a few green ones left on the branch. Knnuhd gets his rope hook ready.

“Helmkin, I have something to show you.” Yingying tugs at Helmkin’s sleeve mysteriously.

Knnuhd catches the tree with his rope hook and drags the tree towards them. When Knnuhd pulls with his injured hand he winces. This does not escape Santoro’s sharp eyes.

Helmkin turns to Yingying. “Yes?”

Yingying leads him behind the sail and shows him the cane with its large leaf on it. Helmkin sees the writings on the leaf and reads it. “Where is the rest of it?” He examines the cane.

“The rest fell off.” Yingying produces a handful of crumpled dry leaves. “But I can tell you what I read...”

Santoro and Knnuhd land the apple tree. They get five green apples from it. All of a sudden, Knnuhd pushes Santoro out of the way. He reaches down to the tree and retrieves a tiny bird nest from it. The nest is shaped like a pear with a small opening on the side. Knnuhd peels back the nest with his fat fingers and finds three blue eggs inside.

“Too little for eating.” Santoro sees what Knnuhd was excited about. “May be for flavouring.”

Knnuhd ignores him and puts the tiny eggs into the palm of his thick hand. He admires them like gemstones. After looking at them for a long time. He empties his waist pouch and lines it with some fluffy furs from his boots. Finally he lays the eggs carefully in the pouch and ties the pouch around his neck. Knnuhd looks positively ridiculous like a babe wearing a bib, but no one dares to comment.

Behind the mast, Yingying finishes telling Helmkin what she read. “So Monastery Hill is where we should be headed?” Helmkin nods contemplatively. “Does anyone else know about this?”

"No you are the first I have told." Yingying admits.

"Why? Why haven't you told your brother?" Helmkin asks.

"He does not trust the old lady and he might say it is black magic." Yingying caresses the cane.

"Well everyone needs to know." Helmkin stands up.

"Yes, but tell them it came to you in a dream, or they won't believe it!" Yingying pleads.

Supper is the usual sardine and tuna meat, but they have green apples for desert. Knnuhd is not hungry for the first time on the journey. The cut on his hand is festering. No one except Santoro suspect something is wrong. Knnuhd spends his meal time admiring his eggs.

"I know where we need to go after we land." says Helmkin. "There is a place called Monastery Hill, we need to seek council with the head Abbot there."

Santoro looks suspicious. "And you know this how?"

Helmkin looks at Yingying.

"Another dream?" Santoro asks.

"Yea, yes, I mean..." Helmkin stutters.

"No. It did not. It was written on the old lady's cane." Yingying interrupts, holding the cane.

Talisha examines the cane and the leaf. By this time the last leaf is withering. However the name of Monastery Hill is still barely visible. "I have heard of hiding secret messages in trees before but have never seen it with my own eyes."

"So it is settled then." Helmkin strikes the iron while it is hot.

Santoro does not object. Knnuhd is still preoccupied with his eggs. Talisha says: "The old lady has gotten us this far."

As everyone breaks up to go to bed. Helmkin whispers to Yingying: "That was easier than I thought."

Yingying goes to sleep beside her Fenix. Santoro pushes her and says: “Why don’t you go sleep with your new brother?” “What are you talking about?” Yingying is dumbfounded. “You know, the one you tell all your secrets to.” Santoro gestures toward Helmkin.

“What do you care?” Yingying retorts and gathers her blankets.

Santoro shouts after her: “Don’t count all your eggs yet, someone has to land this piece of driftwood first.”

The long night passes and the day breaks. A blaring and abrasive cry wakes everyone. It sounds half human and half animal. It is incredibly loud and very close. In fact it comes from the raft.

Chapter Twenty One: Golden Lion



Helmkin and Santoro both grab their weapons. Talisha loads her bow and searches for danger. Yingying pushes her brother and Helmkin aside and says: "It is Knnuhd."

They find Knnuhd sitting with his legs open, cradling something and crying. When Yingying pry open his arms they see two broken blue eggs. "What happened?" Santoro rushes forward. Knnuhd opens his neck pouch and the last blue egg is unharmed.

Santoro says something in his mother tongue. The rest of the companions sign and go back to bed.

Yingying stays with Knnuhd to help him clean up.

"What happened to your hand?" She finally notices.

"BONE FISH" Knnuhd mutters. This jolts Yingying's memory "Oh, that was a few days ago. Why haven't you told us." Despite the resistance she pries open Knnuhd's hand and sees the infected wound. By now the pus has spread and the entire hand the swelling to twice the size.

"Talisha, you better come and take a look at this." Yingying quickly calls for more help.

Before long, Knnuhd's ballooning hand is wrapped up in herbal paste from Talisha's pouch. "Most of my supply got lost in the flood. We need to find land soon if he wants to keep his hand."

After eating, Yingying says something to Knnuhd and goes to work on his head. By mid morning she finishes her contraption and calls everyone to see.

Knnuhd's braids are tied together to make a bird nest on top of his head. The nest is modeled after a Meadow songbird's. Small opening, pear-shaped and lined with wool and straw inside. Being the creator, Yingying has the honor of putting the surviving bird egg inside the nest.

"GOOD LOOK?" Knnuhd asks. No one dares to laugh.

Their salvation first appears as a tiny speckle of light against a purple and orange sky. On their approach they see that it is a lighthouse. When the raft is within an arrow's shot away they can finally see it true.

A magnificent colossus citadel in the shape of an AquaLeo. It is made of volcanic sandstone and layered in bronze and gold. Much of the bronze plates and gold has been stripped away by weather or by hands of man. The towers are in ruins. What is left still shines with the glory of the dying sun. The building's brilliance radiates in all directions, illuminating half the eastern sky. A glorious shower of hope and blessings befalls on those who are lucky enough to witness it.

One can imagine how enchanting the building would have been in its glory days. The ramparts of the citadel are connected to the beach by a narrow sand bar. The companions are incredibly happy to see land at last!

After some discussion the companions camp at the Aqualeo ruins for the night. The bust of the lion contains a small doorway and winding stone steps. Inside the chest of the AquaLeo they find old whale oil lanterns. In the main hall a large fire pit decorate the centre. In the old days, lights from the fire would shine through the eyes and open mouth of the lion. An awesome sight to guide lost souls in their times of desperation. This is the golden gateway to the olde Kingdom of Fire.

Since the raft is no longer needed, the companions dismantle the sail and the makeshift mast. Everyone is glad to have their clothes and blankets back. A fire is started with the wood from the mast. Roasted fish and seagull soup warm up their spirits and bellies.

"My father told me about this citadel lighthouse." Santoro surprises everyone with his good mood. "The Olde King Kandullah built this as a temple to honor his lion god." He puts a big chunk of wood into the fire and the flames jump up to grab it.

"As the story goes, there was an old lion dying in his cave. He has no more than a day left in the time that is given to him. Agony, pain, hunger and the eternal coldness surround him. In this his final hour a monkey walks into the cave. The lion lifts his eyelids and signs, for he does not even have the strength to make a loud sound. The monkey is old and wrinkly himself. He pokes and tugs at the dying lion then sits down close to his head. *You are here to mock me?* The lion asks. *Oh no, on the contrary I am here to feed you.* The monkey replied." Seeing that he got everyone's attention Santoro pauses and takes a drink of water.

"*Yes, I am here to feed you my liege.* The monkey says. Do you remember me? Lion shakes his head. *Many winters ago you ruled these hills supreme. I was only a young'n then. One day I fell from a peach tree and you caught me by my tail. With a clean bite*

my tail was off and I jumped home to my mommy. The lion half opens his eyes as if struggling to remember. I cried and cried until there was no tears left and then I grew up. I became a cautious fellow. I wouldn't go out after sundown. I wouldn't go play in the streams after the rain. I would only eat fruits that I know. Many of my brothers and sisters became snacks for alligators and pythons but I survived. One day there was a grassfire. My mommy and my big brother both had their tails catch on fire and died. But I was able to make it to the river because I had no tail. So you see, you are my savior and I lived a full and fruitful life because of you. My children and grandchildren now run around these hills because of you. The monkey inches closer and closer until his neck is within striking distance of the lion's jaws. *I am a content old monkey. My last wish is to pay my old debt and become your meal. Please grant me this wish.*" Santoro stands up, stretches and yawns.

Smiling and feeling important, Santoro continues. "The lion opens his jaws and reaches out to the monkey with his paws. The monkey's head is between his teeth and he can crash it like a ripened melon." Santoro demonstrates this with his curled up fingers and his sister's head. "Then a sound comes into the cave. It is the sound of giggling young monkeys frolicking on the tree tops. The old lion closes his eyes and a stream of old tears flow down to his chin. He pushes the monkey out of his mouth and breathes deeply. When the monkey asks him why did he stop, the lion answers: *How could I eat the very reason for my existence?* The monkey understands and two animals die in each other's arms."

"What a foolish story!" Yingying wrestles Santoro's arms away from her head.

"Legends say King Kandullah found a dead lion and monkey in a cave during one of his hunting trips. He asked his shaman to interpret and this story is what came out." Santoro stoke the fire one final time before going to bed. "Soon afterward the King started building this temple for the Golden Lion."

"Even if that were true then where is the monkey statue?" Yingying sounds unimpressed.

"We are all monkeys inside the lion's jaw, are we not?" Santoro give her a smirk.

The companions turn in for the night. Seven days out at sea makes everyone yearning for solid land. But now they are on solid stone floor they still feel the swaying of the ocean.

In the middle of the night MoonRyder screeches and takes flight. Fenix starts to bark at the stairway. The companions grab their weapons and look around for danger. Santoro finds his firestone and is about to light a lantern when Talisha puts her hand on him. "No, Look down there." Santoro looks out from the AquaLeo's open mouth toward the ocean. The tide came during the night submerging the narrow sand bar that connected the lighthouse to the beach. Now they are once again surrounded by a watery world. Thousands of hungry glowing green eyes are swimming toward the lighthouse under the cover of the moonless and silent night.

End of Chapter Twenty One.