



Heaven and Hell—Chapters 22-31

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 TWENTY-TWO: Crossing

The Morning Sun showers Stone Bridge as it has done for five hundred years previous. The bridge is a giant arch formed by one hundred sixty solid pieces of volcanic rock. No decorative railings, no relief carvings of angles or demons. Just a hauntingly beautiful and timelessly sad arch over the Fola Valley. It connects two sides of Olde Earth that was separated by the heavens. The arc is a standing testament to men's defiance against this dictation.

The narrow construct means only a single person can cross at a time. Local custom dictates that the rider rings the bell at his end of the bridge before crossing. If he hears no reply it is permissible to cross. Safety is another matter altogether.

Wind in the valley is strong all year round. Two oil lanterns are situated at the mid point of the arch. 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 crossing day.

On this day, no flames can be seen.

Santoro suggests going back and ask the villagers whether it is safe. Knuhd says he does not feel any wind and therefore wants to cross. Helmkin is undecided. When they look around for Yingying, she is already half way 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. A million shades of bright yellow, fiery orange and deep red are taking over the forest like a slow burning fire. The morning mist that rises from the valley below adds to the illusion of the blaze. Finally the sun rays pierce through to give the gentle burn sparkle and brightness.

Santoro rides across to scold her. The two siblings go into their increasingly frequent argument. It ends with a shout and a slap across the face. Yingying cries. Fenix barks and snarls.

"I'd better go over there." Helmkin shakes his head.

Helmkin and His dragon walk up the steep stone steps. As the sun warms up the valley behind, sudden gusts can be felt and it made the beast uneasy. 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 Knuhd: "Follow me! Before the wind gets stronger!"

Knuhd gathers the chains for his Rhyno but the beast refuses to move. Knuhd gets angry and slaps the Rhyno's back. Rhyno moans and moves in circles. Knuhd can hear the wind getting stronger. The leaves are fluttering and the branches are bustling.

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

Helmkin shouts something back at him but all Knuhd can hear is the howling wind.

Knuhd 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 rider holds on for dear life and enters a race with the wind. Helmkin and company cannot see Knuhd 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 Knuhd off his beast. Knuhd 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.

So Knuhd rode on with his head down and hugging the Rhyno like it was his mother. During a particularly strong gust, the beast leans against the stone lantern for support. Suddenly, Knuhd is pinched between the rock and his beast. The pain makes him

loosens his grip only for just a moment. That is when the wind flips him over.

The rest of the group watch in horror as Knnuhd tumbles over the short featureless railings. With nothing to grab onto, Knnuhd's fat fingers scrape and slides on the hard grainy surface until they finally form a fist in mid air.

Knnuhd's large body spirals from the Stone Bridge down to the foggy valley. His deep chested scream trailing him like smoke to a flame.

Helmkin watches his friend in disbelief. Yingying later recall hearing a loud whistle. Santoro claims he saw a shadow in the dense fog. What all three agree they could not hear Knnuhd land at the bottom of the valley. His scream somehow stops.

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 down. All they can do is to sit there and feel rotten and helpless. No one even notices that the rider-less Rhyno makes the crossing and rejoins the group, its fur looking especially tattered.

The wind finally 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 shadow blocks out the sun. When they all look up they see Knnuhd suspended in mid air with a pair of wings behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: TALISHA

The large shadow continue to descent slowly and threateningly. Helmkin instinctually draws Flametongue. The Magical Sword shines bright blue in the morning sun. A new enchanted beast is near.

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

Yingying is the first to run over to check on the big guy. Knnuhd is disoriented and flustered. His heart beats like a rock

slide. All of his hair are stood up, making him look like a scared porcupine.

Knnuhd hugs and kisses the ground, refusing to let go of solid earth for eternity. Without warning he throws up his breakfast. Yingying nimbly jumps out of the way to avoid any splashes.

"First time flyer. He'll be fine." A deep female voice comes from behind the eagle.

The "Icy Virgin" from the night previous is on the eagle's back. Fully clothed in golden wire armour and feather head crown, she walks slowly and gracefully toward the heroes. She gazes over everyone in the group and finally land her eyes on Helmkin and the velvet robe on his waist. She blushes and looks away to Knnuhd again.

Knnuhd moves his shoulders and notices they were bloodied by the Eagle's sharp talons.

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

"NEXT TIME!? NOOO NEXT TIME!" Knnuhd says grudgingly as he finally feels well enough to stands up. Yingying tries to wrestle his hair down with her little ivory comb but each time it digs in it is stuck in greasy knots. Knnuhd yelps in pain and tries to reach for it like a dog chasing its own tail. He spins around and falls again to the ground. Everyone laughs.

Helmkin takes the opportunity to approach the lady. "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 grabbed him before it is too late. His mother must have unpaid favours from the gods." The Virgin tries to hide her unease as her eyes are drawn to the waist band on Helmkin.

"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." 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 brief moment passes then she retrieves something from her chest. Another golden medallion.

Two pieces of gold shine in the late morning sun light. 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 comes for a closer look. They take out their own for comparison.

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

"Gallopig, 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. "I sure wish I stole that scroll on ancient runes."

She feels Helmkin's gaze and quickly corrects herself. "I mean borrow, borrowed that book."

"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.

The Virgin's cheeks are rosy red again.

"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 says: "LOVE."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Decision

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 joined a group of riders on a quest to the 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. The Statue is no longer lifeless. She takes a deep breath and prevents her tears from rolling down her porcelain cheeks.

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

Yingying gives her brother a dirty look. "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 goes over to brush his Rhyno, leaving the argument to the quicker tongues.

Santoro takes Helmkin aside.

"I do not like it. She is going to stir things up. She'll bring bad luck." Santoro says in a hush voice.

"She brought back Knnuhd." Helmkin replies.

"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 packing at any time." Helmkin tries to be diplomatic.

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

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

Santoro looks at Helmkin with disgust. "You are taken with her looks. Do not deny this."

Helmkin looks surprised. "No! No! 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. She will remain so as long as I am around." Santoro eyes Helmkin testily.

The two men look back at Yingying and the Virgin. They are grooming the Mega Golden Eagle together. Yingying is brushing the eagle's shiny coat of feathers with her soft hand.

"I must admit, 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 part ways with her."

"Understood." Helmkin gives a reassuring nod.

They walk back to Yingying and the Virgin and tell them the newcomer is allowed to join them.

That night there are five around the camp fire.

Yingying sits next to the newcomer hoping to learn more about her, but much to her disappointment the newcomer is still quite distant. Santoro tends the fire and the food. Knnuhd tends to the eating. 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 nodded as she received the soup bowl. "I did not find it. It came to me. It came to save my life."

Conveniently, she buries her face into the food and silence fell on the group once again.

Knnuhd drains the last drop of the soup from the cauldron into his bottomless black void of a mouth. Then he fills the fire side with his familiar sweet smell of leaf smokes from his pipe.

Yingying finishes her food and takes out her flute. Her haunting melody is sounding especially melancholy in their surroundings of an old temple ruin.

The moon light showers over everyone. Helmkin notices something he saw before, drops of crystal-like tears on the newcomer's porcelain face. *A sad beauty.*

After the music, the newcomer wipes her face and walks over to Yingying and puts her hand on Yingying's shoulder and says:
"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.

"It 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 charcoal fire. Yingying yells good night and Knuhd's snores. Their beasts settle down around them in a concentric circle.

Helmkin keeps his medallion close. More erotic dreams will not make Talisha's presence easy for him. Helmkin wonders what will he dream about tonight. He does not have long to wonder as darkness overtakes him like the long shadow of a mountain.

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.

"This is the site of battle."

"Who are you?" Helmkin shouts as he turns around in search of the voice. All he sees is the bright sun, the white sand and shiny waves.

Other dreams follows, but none can erase the dream of the white beach. When he wake up, he find a patch of wetness on his cheek and hair. He cried in his dreams.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: 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."

The group 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 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 silk scroll favours the forest path, for it gave shelter from the seasonal rain. It is also shorter by two days.

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 so he back paddles: "Yes, it is ridiculous. Right then, let us head for the forest."

"NOOOO!!!" one can never get used to Knnuhd's booming voice. "I DREAM!!" Knnuhd looks straight into Helmkin's eyes. "WHITE SUN WATER!"

"Endless sandy beach. Crashing waves?" Santoro speaks with surprise.

Helmkin feels as if he is still dreaming. He swallows to moisten his dry throat but there is no liquid left in his mouth. His head pounds with waves of painful blood rushes. He has a hard time forming words.

Yingying helps out. "What are you saying? Did you all have the SAME dream?"

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.

A strong rush of blood makes Helmkin look like he just made love to a woman. He confirms sheepishly: "Precisely."

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 on the night previous. Some of the details were sketchy but all agree the beach is to the northwest of where they are now. All can agree there was a voice telling them this is the site of a fight or big battle.

The differences are also mystifying.

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

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

On Talisha's beach she saw a beautiful poem written in the sand with twigs, but before she can read it a big 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 and a touch of fear like a mild toothache.

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

End of Chapter Twenty-Five

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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 plain.

"We can use a good rest." Helmkin suggests. "Let us camp early and every one clean up and eat their fill."

Clean up is a welcomed suggestion. For the last two days, Knuhd has been sent to the rear of the column due to the swarms of flies he was constantly attracting. He even started to catch them and eat them as snacks.

Yingying and Talisha take their bundle and find a quiet secluded area by a stream. Most importantly, it is also an arrow and half¹ upstream from Knuhd's bathing spot.

Yingying undresses in a blink and plunges into the frigid, refreshing water. 'Us islanders are half fish.' her brother always says.

Talisha steps into the chilly water slowly. In the orange glow of the half-submerged sun Talisha looks positively divine. Her golden hair flows like fine silk screens in the evening breeze. This curtain seductively shields her goddess-like figure that is illuminated by the waning soft daylight.

Yingying treads the shallows and moves toward Talisha. She reaches for the beauty's golden hair and combs it between her fingers.

"Like silk. No?" Yingying's uninvited attention makes Talisha blush.

Yingying traces Talisha's curves to feel her fair skin. When the fingers touches her nipples she pulles away. "That tickles."

"Itchy for man hand?" Yingying teases. Talisha does not hide her annoyance and wrestles Yingying away. The more she fights the more Yingying tickles. A play fight ensues mingled with mock threats and accusations of sexual improprieties. It is as if they are transformed back to a simpler time and place. Laughter and water droplets fill the air around them.

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

"I know one thing. Whoever takes you to bed is a very lucky man." Yingying does not hide her jealousy.

"What does a young 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."

¹ An Arrow distance is approximately three hundred meters.

"What do you mean? 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 bed you."

"Stop your foolish talk."

"I am serious. You are beautiful and desirable. You can have any man you want. Fortune always smile on one such as you!"

"So can you, Yingying. When the time comes." Talisha comforts her.

"You are only pretending to be kind. 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 fisherwoman too." Yingying hugs her knees.

Talisha chuckles. "One day you will find the one who will love you for just who you are. Fishy burps and all."

"Have you met him?"

Talisha shakes her head.

"Then what hope is there for me?" Yingying looks at her reflection in the water. Her bent lips makes her look old.

Talisha chooses silence.

"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 unfolds it. It is a piece of square clothe with some colourful rocks in the middle.

Unimpressed, Yingying slouches a little.

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

Finally, Talisha ceremonially matches the rocks to their colours on the perimeter of the clothe.

"We all know that the Olde Earth is made up of The Nine Realms: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Sand, Air, Earth, Man and Woman. But not everyone knows 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 the land." 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. They are all equally beautiful and mysterious. Together they shine like the rainbows under the sunlight. Magnificent is the only word that can describe them.

"They are as powerful as they are beautiful." Talisha smiles and reaches into her bosom.

She lets the medallion hang in the middle of the rock circle. It swings like a pendulum on the string. First it swings naturally but 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.

Yingying crawls forth like a child, mouth wide open, eyes unblinking. Timidly she touches the gold coin with her finger. To her complete surprise it is quite hot.

"Now try to move it." Talisha give permission to the curious child.

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!"

"That is not my doing. It is the Olde Earth." Talisha smiles. "Now, see where the Uni-Pegasus is headed."

Yingying sees that the creature's horn is pointing to the northwest, to the Realm of Sand.

Talisha puts the medallion back on her long neck. "This is what convinced me to join your group."

Yingying sits back, still trying to make sense of what she has seen. Her doubts are forgotten like last week's clouds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The crossing of the river delta is an intricate operation. The Myrollie Dragon and Horrach Rhyno are too heavy for the soft sand bars near the mouths of rivers so Yingying and Santoro scout out a firmer riverbed lined with stones.

Upstream, hundreds of gentle trickles collect and become full rapids rushing over round stones. The heavier animals have little trouble crossing and Yingying's Fenix is a good swimmer. However, Santoro's Fiory Dragon Kirin starts to whine and run in circles.

The Fiory dragon is from the grasslands. It has never acquired the fondness for large bodies of water. After much hustling, Santoro is able to make Kirin leap from one boulder to another. Santoro takes off his armour and riding boots and guides Kirin like a father teaching a son to swim. His gentle and caring high-pitched voice makes him sound like a different person altogether.

As Kirin and Santoro make their way across the rapids slowly, the rest of the companions wait on the north bank.

All of a sudden, Kirin loses its footing and falls into the speedy water. Santoro puts his full weight behind the chains and yanks Kirin back onto a boulder. Disaster is averted but Kirin now refuses to move another inch. It clings to the boulder and whimpers. Its claws carve into the rocks in

panic. Santoro's shouts and pushes does very little to move it from the safety of terra firma.

The sun moves on the downward arch. But Santoro still could not get Kirin to move. The group becomes restless. Yingying starts to weave a grass rope and Knnuhd starts to gather tree branches in the hopes of building a simple bridge. Talisha gives her MoonRyder a nod and it flies off into the distance.

Before long, MoonRyder flies back holding a silver river sturgeon. It lands on a boulder next to Kirin and begins its lunch. MoonRyder tears into the flesh, exposing the guts and blood of the struggling prey.

The smell of fresh kill gets Kirin's attention. It has been hours since feeding. Mouth watering and throat groaning Kirin arches toward MoonRyder, forgetting the rushing water below. The eagle ignores it and concentrates on the juicy egg sacks. Swallowing chunks of orange red roe, blood and yolk drips from the corner of its beak.

Without warning Kirin lounges at MoonRyder. The sharp eyed eagle takes off just in time. The fish and its rightful owner moves to a rock yonder. Lunch resumes.

The blood and entrails left on the boulder is licked clean by the hungry Kirin. Now with the taste of fresh blood on its long tongue the dragon pays even less attention to the water. It makes another long jump. MoonRyder escapes one more time, but not without leaving a piece of fatty sturgeon liver behind. Kirin gulps down the scrap and keeps pursuing.

A tail, half a head, a dorsal fin, Kirin claims the fish piece by bloody piece. Before long, Kirin is safely on the shore fighting with MoonRyder for the last bits of bones. With a screech and several powerful flaps of her wing MoonRyder leaves the scraps to the aggressor. It lands on a tree trunk to clean its beak and feathers.

The companions can finally get on their way. Santoro and his Kirin brings up the rear.

Helmkin watches Talisha. She and MoonRyder is hitching a ride on the broad back of Rhyno. *This woman has more secrets than one might assume.*

Few steps behind him, Yingying is also watching. She murmurs something in her own tongue and looks away.

Talisha turns to check on Santoro. He is still angry and scolds Kirin continuously. He tries not to make eye contact with anyone else, especially Talisha.

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 without cloud cover." 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 who had forgotten to retreat.

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

A small grave sits twenty steps away from the tree. It is nothing more than a sand mound surrounded by a circle of stones. An old tree branch marks the grave. Tattered ribbons and dry vines are clinging to it against the unforgiving sea breeze. One detail almost escapes the companions if not for the barking and sniffing from Fenix the mountain wolf. They notice a set of footprints going toward the grave. There is no prints leading away from it.

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

Without warning an old hag materializes out of nowhere.

The hag is ancient and crumbling as the tree. Her hair is braided and decorated with sun-bleached ribbons. The rest of her body is adorned with hundreds of trinkets of unidentifiable origins. When she walks she sounds like a toy seller from the market. On top of that she walks with a limp and uses the marker from the small grave as her cane. It is a wonder how she snuck up on the group unnoticed.

A shaman of the old religion.

Again without any warning the old hag starts to beat on Knuhd with her stick. "Away! Away! Animals and Leeches!" Her voice is sharp and abrasive as the sandy gale that is gathering around them.

Knuhd 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, Knuhd falls to the ground and loses consciousness.

Weapons drawn, the four companions surround the old hag by the tree. Who is this mysterious assassin? 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."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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

Helmkin looks at Knuhd on the ground and gestures for Yingying to check on him. 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, but he will live."

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 Knuhd.

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

"Not yet! She hasn't killed yet." Santoro pushes past Yingying. "I recognize Dark Magic when I see it. Any how, we are safe for now." Santoro kicks a couple of broken branches forward. Yingying sees that they were the hag's cane, now chopped in half.

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

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

"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 Druid 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.

She gives up and kneels on the sandy ground, defeated. The rest of the companions gets ready for bed. Talisha pulls on Yingying's shoulders but she refuses to get up.

She stares at the dancing flames. The piercing forked tongues engulf her dreams. All her life she wanted to believe in something magical. All her heart lives for that higher life.

The life of dreams. What is THAT? She knows not. All she knows is that she cannot control the hunger for it. As the fire consumes the wooden stick Yingying signs.

When the bonfire becomes a sintering pile everyone else is already in bed. Yingying picks out what's left of the cane from the smouldering ashes. *Yes, it is just ordinary wood after all.*

The cane is still burning. Yingying extinguishes it in the water bucket and sticks it in the sand to dry. She goes to sleep with her blanket wrapped around her tiny body. The night feels particularly punishing on her shivering skin.

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

Before Knuhd 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 TWENTY-NINE

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

"Well, let us ready ourselves." Helmkin feels restless. This is precisely the moment when the companions realize they do not exactly 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. *All you can do is sharpen your spikes and polish your hammer.*

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 the hag.

"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. In front of Yingying's eyes the two branches start to sprout. New leaves and vines emerge out of the stem and 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 sailed." The hag's voice solemn and heavy.

"Mind my words this time! They shall not be uttered twice." The Hag steadies herself. "I am going to leave my body presently. 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? We are supposed to fight here!" Helmkin tries to make some sense out of it. The hag has spoken her last sentence. Her lips are shut and her eyes are wide open, scanning the watery horizon.

The rest of the group are already packing up. After seeing the hag's powers, even Santoro is helping Yingying rolling up the blankets. *Better to believe it now than to regret 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 hangs lifelessly on the mangrove branches. Yingying wants to run to her aid. Santoro stops her. "Do not stop for anything, remember?".

A storm starts to gather on the ocean. Storm clouds come out of the western sky like a blackened net.

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

Distant thunder can be heard.

Knuhd links up the chains around Rhyno and straightens the bundle at the back.

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

Helmkin steps on Myrollie Dragon's knee and climb to its shoulder.

Lightning, thunder clouds, rain, sandstorm all come at once. The beasts roar and growl.

Helmkin takes a final look at the camp site. The morning bonfire is already doused by the rain and the wind. "Ride! Ride! Ride!" The group takes off with haste.

The sand storm keep one's eyes shut. The clouds block out the sun. The mudslide makes the hooves, claws and paws struggle for grip. It is hard to keep the group together, let alone finding a sandy hill. Then they hear an eagle's screech beyond the dunes. The high-pitched sound carries even in the whirlwinds. Helmkin's Myrollie Dragon answers with his own roar. Its deep rumbling from the throat keeps the group together.

After what seems like half a candle's time² the companions gather on a sandy hill. When they look back at the beach it is unrecognizable. The waves engulf the camp site. A violent lightning strikes the old mangrove tree repeatedly, setting it on fire. The hag is no where to be seen.

"Look!" Santoro points to a stick on the sand hill. It is the hag's cane. No one questions how it made its way here without its master. Everyone starts to dig. Fenix the mountain wolf shows particular aptness at the task. Knnuhd uses the handle of his MorningStar and plunges in. Helmkin holds his FlameTongue with both hands and use the pommel to break up the clumps of sand. Everyone shudders when the sound of the lightning strikes closer and closer.

To the companions' relief they find something in the sand. A large metal ring, too big and too heavy for anyone to wear it. The ring is connected to another smaller one, and then another. It is a chain of some kind. Everyone starts pulling on it. It does not move. They tie their mounts to the chain and keep pulling. After some teeth grinding efforts the chain starts to move. Slowly and painfully the sand gives away and a large contraption appears.

Large pieces of lumber are tied together with leather ropes. Another couple of pulls later the object is fully revealed. Ten giant tree trunks make up a flat square.

"A Doorway!" Yingying shouts excitedly. "A tunnel or a passage!" She starts to dig underneath.

Knnuhd wipes his sweaty sandy face and takes a break. He looks at the ocean again. The waves are jumping higher and higher. Some of them are two huts high. His nautical knowledge tells him that strong winds alone cannot do that. It is something bigger.

"NO DOOR." Knnuhd touches Yingying on the shoulder.
"RRRRAPHDDD!"

Yingying does not understand him, so she keeps digging under the door.

² A candle's time is approximately one and a half hour.

"RRRRRAPHDD!" Knnuhd raised his voice and tries to pull on Yingying. Santoro comes over and Knnuhd shouts the same thing to him: "RRRRRRAPHD!"

Santoro pushes Knnuhd back. "What are you saying?!"

"He is saying it is not a door." Helmkin look at the ocean's menacing dark waves. "It is a raft."

CHAPTER THIRTY

The waves and the downpour make the earth into watery graves for 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 immanent doom. No one will have immunity or pardon.

The companions tie their bundles onto the raft and leave the beasts unrestrained. If the raft overturns they will have the chance to swim away. The Fiorey Dragon Kirin is especially stressed at the sight of oncoming water. It struggles to run away so Santoro chains it to the raft. It starts to take out its frustration on the little critters around, stepping on lizards and snakes as they run by. On the other side, The Myrollie Dragon seems unusually calm. It starts to groom itself.

Talishia lands with her MoonRyder and cries out: "Look!" A faint white line can be seen dividing the ocean and the sky. It becomes thicker and whiter. It is accompanied by a loud sound, the sound of a gargantuan tidal wave.

"Minansoom!" Santoro drives his EastBlade into the sand. "The Last-Will Wave. Villagers back home write their wills and tie it to a large rock." No one complies. Even if they want to, there is no rocks in sight.

The wave is as high as a small mountain. From where the companions stand it looks like an endless wall of water. Rumbling, rolling, crushing towards them. Everyone braces for impact. Knnuhd even says a few prayers in his mother tongue.

Suddenly there is a flash of light on the north side of the beach. It is the hag. She stands on a piece of crumbling earth only a stone's throw away from the wall of waves. Facing the wave she is unyielding. She stands tall. Her hair

is twisting and dancing in the wind like an angry lion. Her charms are jingling and fluttering suspended like a hundred rattle snake tails. She chants an ancient spell. The chant carries far and wide across the land. It is deep like a war horn and high pitched like a canary at the same time.

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. The hag holds back the wave from the grassy hill. Water is still rising but the brunt of the Minansoom Tide is broken down piece by piece.

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 they fly toward the beach. It is no use shouting after her against the thunders.

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

"Come!" Talisha cries out to the hag waving her arm.

The old woman turns toward her and smiles but does nothing.

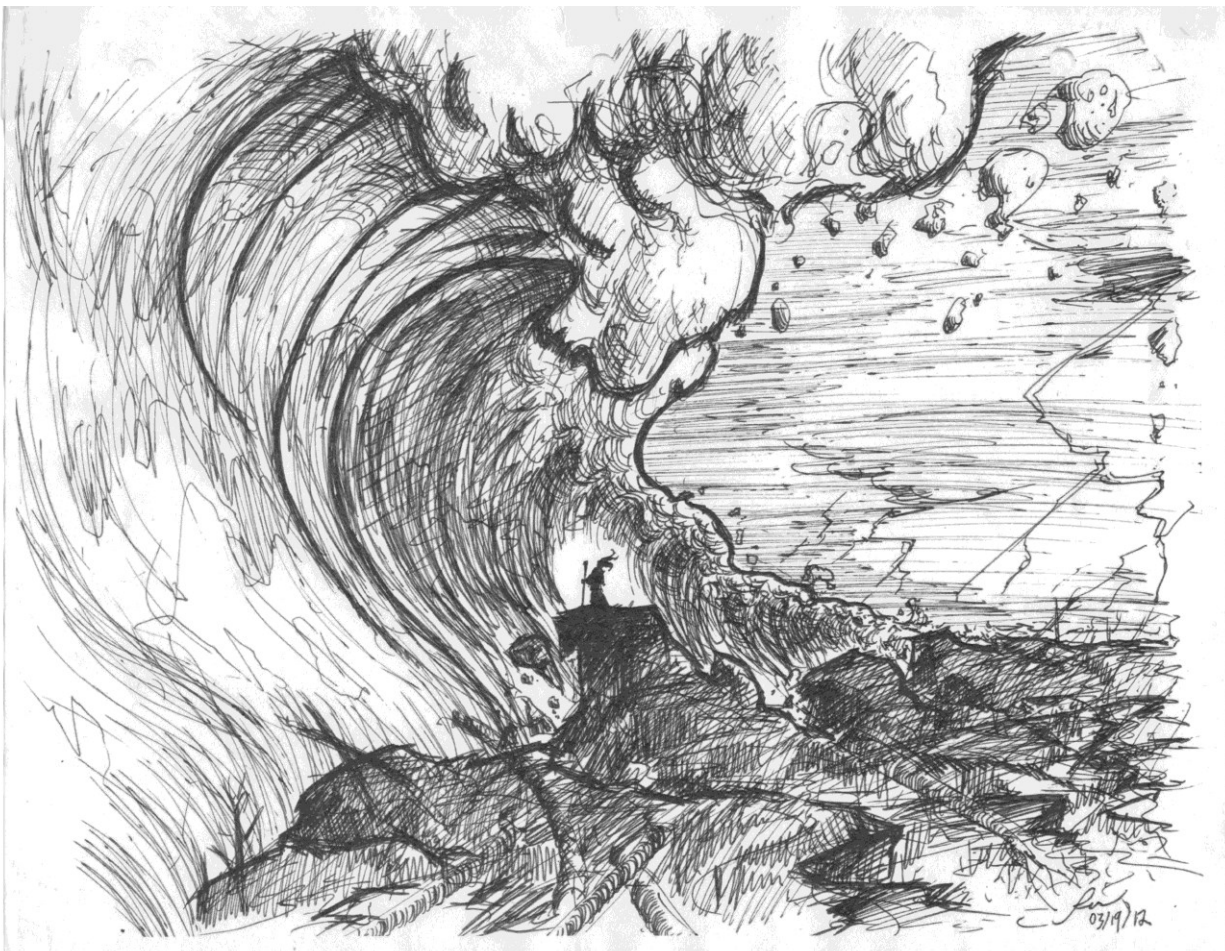
"Hurry!" MoonRyder makes another unsuccessful effort to land. Only three charms are left hanging on the old woman's sagging breasts.

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 and contentment. An old crippled woman at the moment of her death. Yet she embodies more spirit of hope and strength than the rest of the world combined.

Talisha understands.

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 THIRTY-ONE

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.

Knnuhd has seen action on the open sea in his travels. Helmkin has had his share of misadventures on fishing trips. Santoro was taught that all islanders have sea water in their blood. Talisha does not care for swimming but she feels safe with MoonRyder by her side. Yingying, she is shaking and breathing heavily.

Yingying sees the wall of waves and imagines her own bones being crashed 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 sewed together with silk threads after her stunts on 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?" Knnuhd's first thought is to shake her off like a stray cat. 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 ...

No help, 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 waves hit.

Their world first turns white, then blue, then black. The earth first go up, then down, then nowhere. Sound is obscured by water thrashing and objects clashing. Everyone holds on but it was no use. The raft is tossed like a boy's toy boat when all the soldiers fall off into the tub.

Nana was right! It is like being ripped to shreds, but it is also like falling...

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

Santoro beats on her chest a couple more times. The intense pain makes her cough and throw up seawater and sand. She regains consciousness gradually and sits up to a world unrecognizable.

Water, water, everywhere. She sits in the middle of a vast ocean. Overlapping waves still push 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.

Santoro and Helmkin are throwing ropes into the water and shouting things. Fenix and Kirin are grooming themselves. Talisha and her eagle's shadow can be seen gliding across the choppy water surface readying to land.

Yingying goes to the edge of the raft to wash her vomit off her chest. A gigantic mouth full of sharp teeth suddenly comes up from the water and splashes her. Luckily it is Helmkin's Myrollie Dragon. It seems perfectly within its elements and is swimming admirably 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 Knuhd?" 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. Knuhd's big head is stuck between a tree branch floating beside the raft. He looks quite exhausted.

Helmkin calls for his Myrollie: "Dragon! Get Knuhd!" The dragon dives in and swims toward Knuhd. 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.