

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*"I shall make my claim. Come forth,
oh Ye weary of heart and spirits.
Drench 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. Their food is plentiful because the Myrollie Dragon, now named WhaleStar and MoonRyder are excellent fishers. Sardines, eels, 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 got out the dagger. He flips the turtle and takes aim at the belly.

"NOOOOO!!" Yingying grabs Knnuhd's arm. "Leave her be. She is a mother."

"MOTER? NO, TERTER!" Knnuhd is confused.

"I shan't let you. Go have some fish. Go!" Yingying hugs the belly up turtle, putting herself in-between the blade and the creature. The stressed turtle scratches Yingying's arms with her sharp flippers. Yet the eastern girl refuses to budge.

Knnuhd walks away with disappointment, sheathing his dagger.

To calm the mother turtle Yingying takes out her flute and plays a tune. The creature 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 ocean.

"You were talking to her weren't you?" Talisha sits down beside Yingying. "Your flute is your mouth to the animals, isn't it?"

Yingying nods and feels a great sense of gratitude toward this sister she never had.

"How wonderful." Talisha exhales. Together they watch the turtle swim away into the deep blue.

On the other side of the raft, Knnuhd is deboning a piece of fish. A spine pokes his finger and it starts to bleed. He keeps going without noticing.

Another three days pass by. Santoro and Helmkin are getting anxious. They believe the current is towing the raft further into the sea. Their suspicions are fuelled by the fact that WhaleStar refuses to go into the water now. Groups of SharkEels¹ can be seen around them. Waiting their turn for the meal on a wooden platter.

To calm her nerves, Yingying takes out the old witch lady's cane. "She saved all of us and we never showed her gratitude. We should have a service."

"Who will have a service for us?" Santoro jeers as he keeps watch on the waters around them.

"She rescued us. We owe her this." Yingying refutes.

"Fine rescue this is..." Santoro walks away muttering.

Yingying lays the cane on the raft as if it is the old witch's body. She washes it with clean water, and lays a piece of cloth over it. Yingying beats a metal pot and everyone except Santoro gathers around.

"To the remembrance of an old lady by the sea." Yingying starts her speech solemnly. "The old lady was a mystery to us. She came out of nowhere and vanished into nothingness. We only knew her for a flash of time, and some of that time was spent fighting her." She steals a look at Santoro. "We do not know her at all, not even her name." Yingying feels a strong emotion coming up. "But two things are for certain. She is a powerful lady and she saved our lives. If for nothing else, we should give thanks for her final act. She exchanged her life for ours." Yingying steals another look and sees that Santoro stopped moving and is listening to her.

"Oman Koonie Ashnam. To the spirit of the ancient one. Accept her soul and welcome her energy. Let her stand by the great tree. May she be shaded from the scorching flame. May she be sheltered from the eternal cold. May her face be graced with your gentle breeze. May her heart return to the source of all living things. Oman Koonie Ashnam." Yingying closes with a

¹ SharkEels - a large eel with the head of a shark. Lives in coral caves and hunts in groups.

sorrowful chant and a soft kiss on the head of the cane. She gestures for everyone to follow.

Talisha kisses the cane and Knuhd kisses his fingers and then touches the wood. Helmkin leans down to kiss but his medallion falls out from his chest. The golden coin swings and hits the witch's cane and makes a nice crisp sound. Helmkin stores the medallion and kisses quickly.

Next Yingying sends the cane into the ocean. She gives it a gentle push and it is on its way. Everyone else disperses while she watches on. Incredibly, a leave starts to sprout on the head of the cane. The leaf grows at extraordinary rate and is as large as a person's palm. The ocean wind blows it back toward the raft. Yingying retrieves it and she discovers something even more astonishing. The veins on the large leaf connect to spell out words.

Yingying reads the lines quickly. "I do not think you have acquired the skills of understanding runes yet, so I will write in the common tongue."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE, HUMMINGBIRD

The leaf only has one line. She looks at the back of the leave. Nothing else. She turns it and rubs it and washes it in water. Still nothing. Eventually it falls off the branch. Then a new leaf sprouts where the old one fell off. The new leaf is just as big and it has different words.

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

Whenever a leaf is read Yingying tear it off and the next one grows so she can reads on.

"As the flowers petals fail 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 make the petal curl up toward the flower."

The words continue on another leaf.

"Once the dead petal touches the living flower, the fungus can 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. She hides the cane and plans to go back to them after lunch.

At lunch Santoro says he found a floating piece of lumber and constructed a makeshift mast. After lunch he gets everyone to help him building a sail. blankets, pelts, ropes, waist belts, rugs and anything that will catch wind he wanted.

"The sail is working but it is not big enough." Santoro claims. "I need more of your clothing." A piece of loin cloth was all that separated him from a savage apeman. Now he wants everyone else to be like him.

Knnuhd has been under the weather for the last few days so no one asks him to take off his clothing.

Helmkin donate his undershirts and leggings. This makes Talisha blush.

Yingying holds onto her silk dress but donates her cotton long skirts. Talish travelled light so she doesn't have much she can part with. Her blanket and her waist rope was all she has to give. Without her rope the wind lifts her robe and the smooth curve of her breasts are shown now and again.

Santoro is ecstatic when the sails catches the wind and pulls the raft along. When Helmkin questions 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."

Yingying and Talisha huddles with MoonRyder. The Eagle's cupped wings make a temporary shelter for the ladies. Yingying hugs Talisha like hugging her mother. The human warmth and the smooth skin make Yingying relaxed and comfortable. She rubs her face in Talisha's shoulder and chest and she puts her arms around the beauty's waist. Talisha does not resist, for this closeness is something she have not felt for a long long time as well. The two women embrace and caress each other and falls into a stupor.

On the men's side Helmkin and Knnuhd each curl up in a ball with their backs toward each other. Knnuhd sustained a cut a few days ago. He tried to brush it aside but the wound is

infected and filled with pus. He hides it from others and only uses his left hand for most things.

Santoro keeps watch of the wind and continuously adjusts the ropes and his makeshift rudder. When night finally comes he folds the sail and returns the blankets to their owners. He even made a poor man's version of an anchor using ropes and chains so the raft would not drift too far off course during the night.

The women continued to huddle while the men continued to shiver.

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

"The ChrysentalumRose will either die or live depending on its own strength. The same goes for the fungus. Some people try to help the flower by cutting off the dead petals before the rainy season."

"This they find is a fruitless effort. For the Rose would lose its ability to fight parasites and entire fields would be lost. The dead petals serves the flower even in death. It weeds out the weak and allows the strong to flourish."

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. She throws the cane aside and takes out the fallen leaves from her pouch. The old leaves have all dried up and crumbled. The writings are no longer visible. She throws them into the water. They float toward Knuhd's side of the raft. Yingying sees that Knuhd has made a contraption to catch fish.

A long rod with a string hangs over board. A piece of fish meat is tied to the end of the string. Spear in hand, Knuhd waits for his prey. When a group of sardines comes he lunges at them and gets nothing. Yingying laughs at the attempt which angers Knuhd. He hands his homemade spear to her and says: "HUNT YOU!"

Yingying pushes the spear away and starts on her flute. Curiously a group of snappers converge and slides past the raft. Then a bigger group of baby tuna's appear. Just when Knuhd is about to throw his spear Yingying stops him.

MoonRyder glides across the surface silently and catches a young tuna without making much of a splash.

"HWOW!" Knuhd is overjoyed. He hugs Yingying suddenly. It catches her by total surprise. She pushes him away and coughs loudly after the harsh squeeze. Santoro is drawn over by the commotion and gives them a stern look.

Yingying sticks her tongue out at her brother's back and retrieves the fish from MoonRyder. Knuhd gets his dagger out and follows her. By the edge of the raft they gut and clean the fish and starts to eat it with their fingers.

After the snack Yingying rests by her cane. She tears off the old leaf to read on. *Botany is better than boredom.* She thinks to herself.

"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 another leaf off.

"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."

"Take this wooden stick to Monastery Hill. The head abbot will reveal the secrets of the Dark One. Always Know This - You have the strength for victory. If you ever doubt, you need only look at the Roses of the North"

Monastery Hill! Yingying's heart is pounding with excitement. *I shall tell Helmkin.* She runs toward the aft of the vessel and bumps into her brother. Santoro was running toward her.

"No running on deck!" Santoro collects himself.

"What about you?" Yingying fights back.

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

"A Hummingbird? Where?" Helmkin stands up.

Santoro points toward the setting sun and a tiny speckle of green can be seen. The bird gives off shiny twinkles as it flaps its wings rapidly.

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

"No, it just means we are closer to shore!" Helmkin does not hide his excitement.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The others do not admit it, but Santoro's sail does work. He lines up the raft to the sun rise and tweaks it continuously through out the day. Gradually, more signs of the shore shows up: A broken squash ladle; a wooden toy horse; broken trees and bushes.

Santoro and Knnuhd work together to gather all the salvageable material floating toward them. Helmkin worries about the water supply. There may be enough for a day or so. After that they would have to get all their water from raw fish meat.

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

"Helmkin, I have something to show you." Yingying tugs at Helmkin's sleeve mysteriously.

Knnuhd makes a landing with his hook and with Santoro's help they drag the tree towards them. When Knnuhd pulls with his injured hand he instinctively winces. This does not escape Santoro's sharp eyes.

Helmkin turns to Yingying. "Yes?"

Yingying leads him behind the mast 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 examine 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. 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 gem stones. 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 knows about this?"

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

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

"He does not like 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. His wound is turning into a fever. No one except Santoro suspect something is wrong. Knnuhd takes out his three blue eggs and shows them off to everyone. "Good." "Very nice." "Beautiful colour on them." Everyone compliments them but no one knows why Knnuhd keep them.

Helmkin does not wait long. "I know where we need to go after we land." This catches everyone by surprise. "There is a place called Monastery Hill, we need to seek council with the head Abbot there."

Santoro looks pleased. "That is excellent! How do you know this?"

Helmkin looks at Yingying.

"Another dream?" Santoro asks.

"No. It did not come to me in a dream. It was written on the old lady's cane."

"But no one here knows how to read the runes." Talisha joins the conversation.

"It wasn't the runes, it was common tongue written on leaves." Yingying hands her the cane with the last piece of leaf attached.

Talisha examines the cane and the leaf. "I have heard of hiding secret messages in trees before but never seen it with my own eyes."

"So it is settled then, after we land we go find Monastery Hill." Helmkin strikes the iron while it is hot.

Santoro does not show signs of objection. Knuhd is still preoccupied with his eggs. Talisha says: "The old lady has gotten us thus far. We should trust her."

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 aside 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 shakes loose. "You don't even like the witch."

Santoro turns away from Yingying and grumbles: "Don't count all your eggs yet, someone has to land this piece of wood 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 THIRTY-FIVE

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.

No one dares to laugh.

"GOOD LOOK?" Knnuhd asks.

To break the awkward silence Yingying puts Knnuhd's giant helmet on his head. "And when it rains. Dala!" This draws the obligatory applause.

"Great." Santoro says under his breath. "Now there is even less chance he'll wash his hair!" Helmkin whispers back.

"On the brighter side." Talisha interrupts with a smirk. "Maybe now he'll be more level headed."

Knowing about Knnuhd's wound gives Santoro more urgency to land the craft. He now works all day without breaks.

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 AquaLeo². 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

² AquaLeo - a mythical creature that has the body of a mermaid and the head and forelimbs of a lion with webbed claws.

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.

Sensing her brother is up to his old trick of delaying again Yingying threatens him with a stick. "Hurry up San!"

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 crush 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.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Helmkin lights a torch and throws it high above the water. He almost wishes he did not do that. The temporary light shows that the lighthouse is surrounded by countless giant crocodiles. All attracted by the smell of food.

"Alright, everyone listen carefully. Here's what we are going to do." Helmkin draws his sword and sketches out a plan on the sandy floor.

"You are going to get back on the raft and my Myrollie Dragon and I will tow it to shore. Talisha and MoonRyder will clear the path for us from the air. The rest of you will be on the raft and beat back anyone trying to get on." Helmkin feels his blood boiling. "Any thoughts should be spoken now! Otherwise we have no time to lose."

The crocodiles do not attack. Most of them make way for Helmkin and his mount. The raft is tolled slowly behind them. With her bow drawn, Talisha and MoonRyder circles overhead.

Slowly and cautiously the companions move forth. The crocodiles back away. Their luminous eyes watching and their half open jaws waiting. Knuhd wears his large helmet to protect the blue egg. With his good hand he beats his chest and swings his morning star in the air. "COME COWARD!" He shouts as he splashes water at the retreating crocodiles.

All of a sudden, as if by a silent command, the crocodiles submerge. One by one they dive down to the black night ocean. Few moments later the surface is clear and the shore is within reach once more.

Helmkin takes a deep breath. Santoro and Yingying are still holding their weapons tight. Knuhd swears at them and spits into the ocean. He wipes his beard and straightens his helmet.

Myrollie Dragon WhaleStar screams and lifts it's right leg. Two juvenile crocodiles sink their teeth into the dragon's calf. *An Underwater Attack.*

Whalestar is able to bite one crocodile off with his far-reaching jaws but he can't quite reach the other one. With a swing of Flametongue Helmkin cuts off its head. The headless body flies through the air and lands in water. The head, however, is still locked on to Whalestar's leg.

As the dead crocodile's body sinks, a group of hungry crocodiles tear at it. The other injured young crocodile has attracted unwanted attention with its bleeding neck.

Helmkin looks for Talisha. When he spots her he shouts:
"Shoot them! Shoot them!"

"Why?" Talisha could not understand the reason for wasting arrows on distracted crocs.

"Just do it! Trust me!" Helmkin unlocks the croc head from WhaleStar's leg and presses forward.

ZOOM! Talisha's arrows dashes through the air and lands on the three adults dining on the injured young croc. The hits releases more blood into the water. A dozen more crocs are now swimming toward the blood.

"Cannibals." Santoro realizes Helmkin's reasoning and starts to throw his fishing spears at the ones surrounding the headless carcass.

Soon two clouds of red is swirling in the water. Helmkin and Whalestar pull the raft between them and head to shore. Knnuhd kills any crocodiles trying to board the raft and throws their bodies far. Santoro runs out of projectiles and Talisha is out of arrows as well. Yingying has to restrain Fenix from jumping into the water to fight the crocs.

After a long struggle the companions escape to the sandy shore. Everyone's exhausted and hungry but the priority is to move off the beach and find a sheltered place.

Deeper into the forest, Santoro and Knnuhd build a fire and unpack some dried tuna. By the time the fire is ready, everyone gathers to share a well earned breakfast.

"Santoro told us a nice story last night." Helmkin stands up after he eats his fill. "Since I don't know any great legends or fancy tales. I will tell you about my home town."

"Why won't you tell us about your sword? Where did you get that from? I saw how it cuts through the croc's armor like cheese." Yingying laughs and taunts him.

"No, that's story for another day. I will tell you about my village. It is called Eden Springs." Helmkin continues and he

is instantly transfixed on his most beloved place on Olde Earth.

Helmkin recites a long poem from the Book of Songs.

On the shores of Hook Lake is the village Eden Springs. On a good day you can see the snow capped Olde Man Mountain to the east. On a foggy day you cannot even see the goat hills across the bay. The village is situated on the slanted slopes of the broad valley that extends from south east to the north west.

In all worlds there are those who bear the brunt of the storm and there are those who only enjoy the calm of the backwaters. There are those who wield magnificent swords and there are those who forge the weapons in the comfort of their shop beside a peaceful meadow. The most daring warhorses are often brought up in the lazy and lush grasslands. Even as a pony, he knows where his heart lies. He will risk fire, water and harsh winters just to get back to his patch of grass under the blissful wind and sun. Eden Springs is such a place. It is a crib to raise heroes of horses and of men.

As one descends along the Olde Well Road it makes several sharp turns and switchbacks. At one point it twirls like a piggy's tail. The road is carried by an ancient stone bridge. It takes twenty steep spiral steps to go down under the bridge and continue on toward the village. The stones are covered by moss and vines which soak up the morning mist and the afternoon sun. If you ask the leaves and stalk, they will tell you about unexpected rain storms and hurried footsteps. They will tell you about drenched lovers and steamy kisses. Many unforgettable romances were written under the half moon shape of the Olde Well Road bridge. The names of those young hearts are recorded by carvings on the bridge stones and trunks of birch trees.

As the road makes its way to the village it passes the cemetery hill. As an old wise king once said, If you want to know a people, you must see how they bury their dead. The memory stones in Eden springs are neatly laid out in smooth arcs. Some are marble and some are granite. Some are luxurious and some are plain. But all of them are placed according to the date they died, not according to their stations or wealth in life. If one traces one's ancestry, he would also see who his great grandfather lived with. Who his friends and neighbors were. When there was a crop failure, a

harsh winter or a war, these can also be read from the burial grounds. It is a solemn and peaceful hill of reflections.

Most of the memory stones have colorful flowers planted around them. Some have prayer candle holders. Several memory stones are more prominent and they always have their candles lit. These are for the heroes of the village. They defended the village from the enemies and some gave their lives for it. When the people visit cemetery hill they always bring the old heroes something, be it a little toy from the boys or a trinket from the girls; be it a piece of festive cake or a seasonal piece of fruit. They always leave something for those who died so the village can live on. They light the heroes' candles to show that they always have a place among the people of Eden Springs.

When Olde Well Road enters the village proper it becomes a cobble stone street. Along it are bakeries and taverns; flower shops and butcher shops; blacksmith and tailors. All the windows have seasonal flowers decorating its chins and bright colored wooden panes decorating its ears. Its eyebrows are often draped with soft fabrics parading the local favorite colors -- Turtle Green and Aqua Blue.

In the morning, when the rooster crows three times, the streets come alive with people and animals. The bells of the oxen cart announce the coming of the milk and cheeses from the hill farms. Blacksmith's hammering wakes up the dogs. They group at the cross roads and wait for the hunters. After throwing the bones to distract the dogs, the hunters sell their pelts to the tailor and their meats to the butchers. Florists open their doors and windows to greet the passersby, who decorate their breakfast tables with wild lilies, blue daisies and water lilacs. The sweet smell of fresh breads starts from the baker's oven and quickly fills every kitchen in the village.

This is where the Olde Well Road ends, The Olde Well. It sits at the village square where everyone gets their daily water for their animals and their families. No matter if they are rich or poor, smart or dumb, beautiful or plain-looking. All drink from the same well here at the heart of Eden Springs.

If one day, your beloved pet runs away, you should hope it ends up in a place like THIS. That's the kind of place this is.

"And that is my home village Eden Springs." Helmkin finishes his story and wonders why Yingying and Talisha are staring. Then he realizes two drops of tears are hanging from his own chin, waiting to fall.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Just past the forest is a foot path. Despite Helmkin's objections, the group decides to follow the path. Soon the road becomes a well travelled oxen-cart road. Yingying tells everyone to say that they are a circus troop heading north.

Not long after, the road takes a turn, they meet other travellers. Mostly young men and small families. Yingying notices the men are traveling in the direction the group is going but the families are traveling the opposite way. Helmkin dismounts and approaches a man dressed in hemp canvas and leather straps.

"Pardon me, good sir. Can you tell me which way to the Seminary Mounts?" Helmkin speaks the best common tongue he could muster.

"Monastery Hills you mean? " The man is surprised. "Just beyond the village of Widow's Cliff. You are on the right road."

Helmkin nods back to the rest of the group. He turns back to the man and asks: "Are you going to the village as well?"

"Yes, for the Gathering." The man takes a look at Helmkin and his companions. "Who are you?"

"We are the Incredible Five." Helmkin explains. "We are from the southern ports, you might have heard of us?"

The man shakes his head.

"The Circle of Fire show? The Six Arrows trick? The Maiden of the Underworld? " The man shakes his head three times at Helmkin.

"Who has spare silvers for roadshows nowadays." The man says. "I travel to the Gathering to serve the Lorde. No grains left back at home."

The Gathering, as Helmkin finds out from the man is an annual local tradition. The priest from the Monastery Hills puts on a spectacle for the common folks. He then selects ten men and ten women to serve the Lorde of the Apocalypse.

"The priest? Is that who you call the head Abbot?" Helmkin asks.

"The head Abbot? Never heard of him. The Head Priest has been on the Ivory Throne for as long as I can remember." The man seems confused.

"Thank you good sir, our talk was a pleasant one. Don't forget to tell your friends and family about the Incredible Five!"

"Friends and family I have none, but I'll look yous up if I can spare some drinking coins." The man takes another glance at the curios group and heads on his way.

Helmkin conveys the information back to the group. "Lord of the Apocalypse? Who is that?" Yingying asks. "I didn't ask." Helmkin says. Talisha interjects: "I know."

When everyone turns and wait for Talisha, she finally says: "He is who we call the Dark Wizard."

The village of Widow's Cliff situated on a high rocky ridge overlooking the river delta below. At the narrows of the river, sediments and mud are collected for hundreds of thousands of years. They form rolling hills which then became the famous Monastery Hills.

"During the Olde Order, all the spiritual elders made pilgrimages to the Mounts. They sent their torch bearers to the Mounts to study. Even the druids council respected the seminary at the monastery and paid regular visits to consult on matters of importance. The Seminary had a Head Abbot who is the spiritual leader of the school." Yingying rolls up her silk scroll. "That is all that was written about it."

"Nothing was mentioned about the Priest and the Gathering." Santoro is perplexed.

"Well, we shall go and find out. The man says the Gathering is happening in a few days." Helmkin examines the scroll again but finds nothing more worth noting.

Two days later, a loud horn wakes up the companions from the stables they are staying in. The sound was so loud, even Knnuhd jumped up. He makes sure that his blue egg is undamaged and curses in his native tongue. His hand injury is healing now that they are on land and have access to herbs.

People are already heading to the village square where a large wooden platform has been constructed. They sing a rhythmic chant as they walk to the Gathering.

Lordy, Lordy, Thou Shall Save Me.

From the Land and over the Sea.

Time of darkness is at hand.

Old wounds Shall be Amend.

Lordy, Lordy, Thou Shall Save Me.

From the Land and over the Sea.

When the Iron is crowned.

All thy sufferings shall be drowned.

The companions leave their beasts and weapons so as to not draw attention. They walk with the crowd to the village square.

At the square, hundreds of people are already standing and chanting. More are pouring in by the minute. Finally at five bells exactly, when the sun is directly overhead, a loud Gong is struck. The crowd quiet down.

Commotions can be heard beneath the large wooden platform. People stand on their toes to get a look. Yingying cannot see anything so Knnuhd lifts her up by her waist.

Bugles and woodland harps start to play and a beautiful maiden appears at the center of the platform stage. She is dressed in see-through satin that flows with her red hair. She holds and plays a delicate harp as she moves gracefully around in circles.

Moments later, nine other maidens join her from the center. Some playing bugles and others playing harps. All exquisite, all virginal and pure. Slowly and gracefully they form a circle on stage. The music turns from arousing to hailing.

The loud gong sounds again and a Priest dress in red emerges from the centre. The crowd goes wild. The Priest is wearing long red silken robe that goes over his head. With a wave of his hands the music stops and silence befalls on the square.

"Una Hehma Buura! Una Hehma Buura! Una Hehma Buura!" The Red Priest raises his Iron Scepter, which is in the shape of a double point man slayer³. "A fine day granted to us by the Lorde of Iron. May his reign last longer than the mountains!"

The crowd joins in. "Huura! Huura! Hurra!"

"Now let the processions begin!" The Red Priest sits on a high chair.

Music resumes and young naked boys and girls are being led to the Priest in single file lines. The Priest instruct them to stretch out their hands or to turn around. If the Priest nods then the young child is being led down behind the stage. This would almost always be accompanied by a loud cry or some kind of commotion in the crowd.

"What is happening?" Helmkin asks the person next to him.

"Be quiet! The Red One is selecting the Divine Youths for the Lorde!" An annoyed voice comes back.

Helmkin does not dare to ask further.

Meanwhile, Knnuhd is getting very restless. He fidgets even more than usual. Finally he takes off his hood and exposes his big head and knotted hair. Yingying goes to help him cover up but he refuses. "HOT, HOT, EGG!"

The companions form a circle to protect Knnuhd and his secret but it was no use. As Yingying retrieves the tiny blue egg from Knnuhd's hair nest she can clearly see a crack on the shell. Knnuhd's face starts to swell and redden. A large drop of tear is collecting just beneath his left eye. At any given moment he may bellow like a big child.

That's when Yingying raises the egg and turns it in her hand and whispers: "It is hatching!"

³ Double Point Man Slayer- a favoured weapon for mercenaries for its fast action and doubled stabbing and cutting ability. It looks like two daggers jointed at the handle.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The selection of the Divine Youths continues on the stage. Knnuhd wipes his face and opens his eyes. The tiny blue eggs move in the center of Yingying's palm. Soon more cracks appear and the tiniest beak can be seen poking through. Knnuhd wants to touch it but he is afraid. He wants to hold it but he is too timid. Life starts in front of his eye. A miracle happens in the palm of Yingying's hand. Knnuhd is so happy he cries quietly.

With a final push the bird's head is out of the egg. It's eyes are shut but it's mouth is wide open. Chirp-chirp-chirp, the baby is hungry.

The crowd around them is no longer tolerant. They give strange looks and start to mumble.

Yingying can no longer hold the bird in her hands. She puts it in her shirt. The bird is so hungry it stumbles around in her chest.

The baby bird finds its way to Yingying's nipple and tugs on it. "AAAAhhhhhh...." Yingying screams.

The procession stops.

"Who???" The Red High Priest yells angry from the stage.

The crowd parts way and gives up Yingying. She signals the companions not to intervene.

Yingying stands alone, her shirt is half open. The bird is finally quiet.

The Red High Priest is motionless. He whispers and four maidens carry him on his chair toward Yingying.

Yingying freezes on the spot.

Santoro goes for his EastBlade, then he remembers that Helmkin told them to leave their weapons behind. "Kumbashi!!!" He curses.

The Red Priest raises his sceptre and runs it down the centerline of Yingying's torso. From her chin to her chest to her bellybutton to her privates.

It took both Knnuhd and Helmkin to hold Santoro back.

Without warning, Talisha walks forth. She stands in-between the priest and Yingying. With a few quick movements of her fingers she drops her clothes onto the ground. Her ceramic smooth skin and perfect lines are there for all to see. "Take me, I am fairer than she." She announces.

The Red High Priest tilts his head and stares at Talisha in silence. After a brief moment there is a nod from his red hood. His maidens and henchmen grab Talisha by the arms. But they also grab Yingying. Yingying struggles and reaches out to Knnuhd. Knnuhd holds her hand and feels something warm and soft inside. It is the baby bird.

The procession ends with the final two acquisitions. The Divine Youths are corralled onto oxen carts headed for the Monastery Hills. The crowd disperses. Leaving Helmkin, Santoro and Knnuhd standing in the square with a rotten feeling.

"A true warrior never leaves his sword." Santoro rushes off in the direction of the stables.

"Wait!" Helmkin yells after him. He looks to Knnuhd, who is still holding the baby bird.

"YINYIN NEED WE" Knnuhd agrees with Santoro.

"Alright! But let's get one thing straight! He is staying back!" Helmkin points to the little bird.

Back at the stable Santoro is already saddling up his Kirin for the assault. Helmkin walks over. "Look, Santoro, we are going to do this right."

Silence.

Helmkin walks to retrieve his sword.

Santoro puts on his straps.

Helmkin feels irritated. "I did not know what to expect! None of us did!"

"If we had our weapons, we would be prepared for anything." Santoro tightens the stirrups still not making eye contact.

"What, what would you do? Slaughter all those people?"
Helmkin walks over to Santoro.

"Anyone laying a hand on my sister would not see that hand again." Santoro looks at Helmkin straight in the eye, threateningly.

"I would not deal out deaths so lightly." Helmkin stares right back.

"That is not your sister out there!" Santoro snaps. "She's the only one I have left. I would cut down a hundred souls without blinking. Maybe your father would have stayed if you fought for him."

Helmkin draws his sword but Knnuhd holds him back. "FIRST YINGYING TALISSA"

In the stable. Fenix senses something is wrong when they returned without Yingying or Talisha. Moonryder is also restless and anxious.

They decide to leave Talisha's Moonryder behind to guard the camp. Fenix will follow its master's scent and lead them to Yingying. Under the cover of dust the three move out toward the Ominous Hills.

On the ride in cool air clears Helmkin's mind. *What would I do if my father was taken away in front of me? Would I not fight? Will I fear death?*

Sacrificial smoke can be from the towers upon the Seminary on Monastery Hills. *One fortunate youth will be united with the Gods every night until the two moons are full.* Helmkin overheard one of the locals in the crowd. He decides to keep that to himself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Santoro, Helmkin and Knnuhd ride up to the gate of The Seminary on Monastery Hill. The guard house is ill-lit, one can barely make out the silhouettes of two guards.

Helmkin cautions Santoro: "Let me do the talking."

"No! I will!" Santoro leaves no room for negotiation.

He rides to the gate and shouts: "Open!" A guard comes out. A swing of the Eastblade and the guard's head is rolling down the steps. "Open!" Santoro points his bloodied blade tip to the other guard. A third guard runs out from the back of the gatehouse. Santoro cuts his escape short with a flying dagger.

The surviving guard promptly open the swing gate for Santoro while wetting himself. As Santoro passes by, he swings his Eastblade at the guard cutting off the tip of his hat. "That's the direction you shall head to if you don't want to join your mates." Santoro's Eastblade points straight to the village down below.

The entire compound is preparing for the sacrifice of the virgin. Guard towers were not manned. Torches were left unlit. The three rescuers encounter very little resistance. A team of guards going toward the front gate and five drunken male servants having a bit of fun with a servant girl was all they meet on the way up. Santoro makes quick ghosts out of the guards and the male servants. He throws some clothes at the servant girl and gestures for her to get out.

"I think we should talk about this, Santoro. We should not be killing people just like that!" Helmkin catches up to Santoro and gets a word in.

"They are all guilty, one and all. Would they think twice about sacrificing my sister to the devil himself?" Santoro speaks with clinched teeth. "You either come along or step a side, because this armour of mine is going to be crimson in the morning."

Helmkin and Knuhd look at each other then follow Santoro into the courtyard at the top of the hill.

Inside the courtyard there are hundreds of people lying on the ground in a state of trance. Some young, some old, some male, some female. Several of them are holding round incense vessels. Purple smoke comes out of the vessels. The smoke has a sweet but pungent smell to it.

"DEE-LEE-REE! FACE COVER!" Knuhd throws a piece of clothe at Helmkin, who ties the fabric around his face. Helmkin heard of the forbidden pearls people grind into fine powder and burn with dry sweet grass. Those who inhale it cannot think straight and cannot feel pain. They just suspend in dream-like states. The traveling traders call the pearl Derlireum.

A hand of a smoker grabs Santoro's ankle and yells out: "More smoke." Before Santoro can react, Helmkin kicks the hand away. Santoro shields his sword and says: "What is the difference? He wouldn't feel it anyhow."

They walk toward the main building. It is in the shape of a giant warrior's head. The eyes and nostrils are windows and the mouth is the doorway. Harps and bugles are coming from within. Chanting and howling can also be heard. The three companions tie up their mounts by the entrance and enter the head building with weapons drawn.

Inside the granite hallway the smell of Derlireum is much stronger. The tunnel turns left and right until they arrive at a large round hall. People are all sitting and waiting. They all face toward the centre. The rescuers are completely unprepared for what they see --- The Dark Wizard sitting in the centre.

Santoro grabs his blade and runs forward. Helmkin stops him. "No! That's not him!" After a second look, Santoro sees that the Dark Wizard is as tall as a large tree. He is carved out of smooth black marble.

The Red Priest emerges from behind the giant statue. "Una Hehma Buura! Una Hehma Buura! Una Hehma Buura!"

The crowd shouts back: "Huura! Huura! Huura!"

"May our Lorde of Iron protect each and everyone of you. May his reign be as long as the Mountains!" The Red Priest starts his sermon. "Tonight we bring in a new selection of his Lordship's holy servants. They come from all walks of life and all corners of the earth, but they all have one thing in common. They all love the Lorde of Iron!!! So much so that they would not feel the pain at their own death if the death serves and glorifies him. They would give up their earthly bodies join the Lorde in his spirit at Ascension."

A loud gong sounds and a side door opens. Out comes thirty some screaming young girls. All naked. They run toward the statue of the Dark Wizard and grind their bodies against it. Some hug the legs and some try to climb higher. They step on top of one another trying to get higher and closer to the Lorde.

Santoro immediately spots Yingying. Her hair is all tangled and greasy. Her face is full of tears and her eyes are half

open. She looks pale but carefree. She starts to suck on the statue's toes. Helmkin still could not find Talisha among the naked girls.

"Ayyyyyyyyyyyy!" Santoro lets out a blood-chilling war cry and jumps into the crowd. His Eastblade swinging and his path is soon littered with body parts of the guards. The Red High Priest shouts and more and more guards pour in armed with long spears and curved iron moon sabers. They are no match for Santoro's Double Sea Serpent Eastblade. He moves and swings in fluid, dance-like motions that are hardly derailed by a blocking spear or a screaming foe. Helmking and Knnuhd bring up the rear with their Flametongue and MorningStar.

The black-clothed guards keep pouring in. Soon there are hundreds of them surrounding the three rescuers. The Red High Priest is standing safely on the shoulder of the statue. He motions for the guards to take the naked virgins away. One black guard grabs Yingying's arm.

Fire spills out of Santoro's eyes. He jumps high into the air and lands on top of the heads of two black guards. He leaps and runs on the heads of people with unbelievable agility. The Red High Priest gives a command and a hundred cross bow fires at Santoro while he is in the air. Santoro spins and ducks but one bolt pierces his left thigh. Santoro falls to the ground. A hard thump and a crash, then silence, then a scream of anger.

Helmkin and Knnuhd tries to catch up but before they can get there, Santoro stands up and keeps running toward the statue. Yingying is no longer there. Santoro runs and jumps up the stature and swings at the Red High Priest. He misses and the blade gets stuck on the statue's neck. Santoro loses his balance because of his injured leg and falls to the lap of the statue. The Red High Priest seizes the opportunity and escapes with his entourage.

Helmkin and Knnuhd comes to Santoro. "Where's Yingying?" Santoro looks around. They see a black guard holding Yingying standing behind the statue. The guard is holding an Iron Moon Saber ready to strike.

Knnuhd winds his morningstar and walks threateningly to the guard. Helmkin readies his Flametongue and cuts off the guard's escape on the left side. Santoro limps behind them. His bare hands are poised to choke the guard to death.

The Black guard has a masked face. Only his eyes are showing. He stands his ground with Yingying in his left arm.

Knnuhd's swings faster and faster. He aims at the head of the Black Guard. Just before he lets it fly Helmkin yells:

"Wait!"

CHAPTER FORTY

Knnuhd can not hold the spiked cannon ball. It flies with its skull-crushing ferocity toward the guard. The guard ducks and avoids it with surprising ease. He takes off the helmet and mask. A full head of golden locks flow out. It is Talisha dressed as a guard.

"You sure took your sweet time getting here." Talisha dismisses everyone's shock. "We must hurry if we want to see the Head Abbot."

Remembering their original purpose, they follow Talisha. Santoro retrieves his weapon and uses it as a walking stick. Yingying is still in a Derlirium stupor. The brother and sister head back to the courtyard while Helmkin, Knnuhd and Talisha pursue the mission. They go through the trap door behind the giant statue of the Dark Wizard.

The Seminary on the Monastery Hill is built like a man's body. The Head Building connects to the rest of the buildings through a complex network of tunnels. By following trails of blood the companions arrive at the Heart Temple.

The Heart Temple is heavily defended by a garrison of archers. After Knnuhd knocks two of the archers off, Talisha's arrows are restocked. The battle becomes one-sided.

They keep one guard alive. Helmkin interrogates the survivor about where the Head Abbot is. "Old master is in the Hovel!" the guard answers.

The Hovel is an underground conical hall. The smell of waste and sewage makes one gag. In the centre is a wood burning kiln. The companions walk past the heaps of rubbish and beat back aggressive crows who are picking through the piles.

"Come!" Helmkin and Knnuhd follow Talisha's voice to find a sorry-looking oldman chained behind the earthen rubbish stove. He is an old fragile man with shaved head and long white beard. He is naked save for the loin rag. The crows are picking at his open wounds and the skin on his back are searing on the kiln wall. Dried blood is congealing around several fresh stabbing wounds to his stomach. A gruesome sight, even for the battle-hardened Knnuhd.

Talish approaches him and the Abbot squeezes a few labored words out. "How do you do? Please excuse the mess." His ancient, wrinkled eyes are flooded with fresh tears.

Helmkin cuts the chains with his Flametongue. Knnuhd lays the abbot down on the ground. They can see his light is fading fast.

"We have been summoned, Your Excellency, but we know not why!" Helmkin does not wait. The Abbot touches Helmkin's face as-if looking at an old friend. More tears flow down. He sticks his tongue out and catches the tears. Drinking his own tears, his mouth becomes moistened.

Looking past Helmkin the Abbot observes: "So few of you." His voice is like an old broken drum, vibrating with broken syllables.

"Two are resting. There are five of us." Helmkin reassures the abbot.

"We prayed for nine." The Abbot reaches for Helmkin's Medallion. "Nine ancient bloodlines of the nine warrior kings."

"To what end?" Helmkin gets excited.

Talisha brings a broken dish filled with water for the old man. He moistens his throat and continues. "The Wizard King of Iron tricked the world. Smiles and flowers hid his cruelty and ambition. He is RAPING US! He is RAPING US! Every mother and child! Every Man and woman! Raping!" Violent coughs interrupts the old man. Bloody flam fly out from his mouth.

"So we are to kill the Dark Wizard?" Talisha asks.

The Abbot looks at Helmkin, Talisha and Knnuhd. He then turns away to face the kiln. "Harold! We have tried. But too few

have come. The enemy is too many. How else can this end?" He speaks to the smokes rising to the night sky.

"Harold is my father." Helmkin follow the Abbot."Did you know him?"

The Abbot turns. "He is a brother. I see the same fire in you." The Abbot keeps inching toward the kiln.

"Where do we go? How do we defeat the Wizard? Are there others?" Helmkin is impatient with questions.

"Hope was faint to start but now it is all but extinguished." The abbot keeps walking.

Helmkin stops the old man. "There is still hope! We can do what is required."

The Abbot freezes and stares at Helmkin's eyes. "Same Flame, the very same." He looks up to the night sky through the open chimney. "There is but one left of the Olde Druids Council. In the concealed Crystal Dome he bides his time. He may be able to give you comfort for I have none left." With this the abbot runs toward the kiln and jumps into the burning fire before anyone can stop him.

As he screams in pain a few words leave his lips and echo in the conical chamber of incineration. "Sorry about the mess!"

The flames engulf him and within moments his thin body starts to burn. The fire spills out of the kiln and spreads to the rubbish heaps around it. The companions back away as the flames spread quickly. Thick poisonous smoke fills the Hovel and makes it hard to see. By the time they found the exit the chimney is starting to topple in the intense heat.

Helmkin, Talisha and Knuhd run through the smoke filled tunnels and dive into a watery aqueduct. The water carry them to a pond at the back of Monastery Hills. They run back to the stone gates where Santoro and Yingying are waiting with the beasts.

The companions descend the hills. Behind them the night sky is lit up by the spreading fire. The Wizard's followers and servants are fleeing the compound. The Red High Priest is nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The companions hobble along the path to the Village. Soon they find that they have the road all to themselves. Knnuhd take the front and Helmkin bring up the rear. Talisha decides to not call her eagle for fear of hidden archers under the cover of darkness.

Half way down the hill they see a horse wagon stuck in the mud. The driver is cursing and trying to lift the back wheel.

"HELP NEED?" Knnuhd asks the man. The man is startled by the booming voice. But when he saw Knnuhd and his companions he shouts something to the inside of the carriage and runs away.

Knnuhd gives no chase. Instead he readies his weapon and approach the carriage. "WHO IN?" he demands.

"I am a sickly gentleman. I am sure my driver has gone for help. Please don't trouble yourself and be on your way." a feeble and shaken voice comes out.

"Wait a moment, I know that voice!" Helmkin rushes forward and kicks down the carriage door. "Come out! Priest of the Dark Lord. Before I slash your carriage in half."

The door is pushed aside. The inside of the carriage is filled with shiny ceremonial wares made of gold. The Red Priest steps out slowly holding his sceptre. With the sharp end pointing to his heart he speaks: "You can have the gold. If you let me live. I can put a few good words in for you in front of my lorde!"

"Bold talk for a dead man!" Santoro stands up. His teeth clinches in pain and hatred.

"If you valued your life you would have left the gold and rode on a light horse." Helmkin grins and gives Knnuhd a look. A quick swing of Knnuhd's right elbow brings the priest to the ground where he is quickly bond with ropes.

The companions distribute the priest's loot among their mounts. The carriage is pulled up from the mud. They put the priest inside with a gag.

"Why don't we cut off his head and be done with it?" Santoro asks.

"That may be the thing to do, but we are not going to do it here and now." Helmkin tries to keep his voice down.

"What are we waiting for? A proper trial? You have seen his wicked ways." Santoro does not budge.

"Yes, I want him dead as well, but we are going to wait till the morning and we are going to decide on it together." Helmkin puts his hand on Santoro's shoulder. " He will pay for what he did to Yingying and yourself. I promise."

The reassurance does not put Santoro at ease. He rides away.

Talisha, who is riding Fenix with Yingying over hears the exchange. "What do you think we should do to the Priest?" Helmkin asks her.

"Kill him." Her coldness takes Helmkin by surprise.

That night they tie up the prisoner in the barn. Helmkin guards him while the rest of the companions are enjoying a night of restful sleep in the tavern. Helmkin treasures this time to be alone.

The bright moons lights up half the barn. Helmkin takes out a handkerchief from his chest. Its purple lilac embroidery looks alive in the grey-blue surrounding. It reminds Helmkin of a night not that long ago.

Lilith looked like an angel. She comes to the back of old man Girthu's barn. The door creaks and Helmkin pretended to doze off. Lilith tickled his toes.

"You are late!" Helmkin lunged at her and brought her down to the hay bed he made for them. He kissed her on the mouth, on the cheek, along the neck and on her bosom. Her body responded in kind. Her hand grasped for his chest and his back and landed on his buttocks. He worked his way down and untied her laces at her waist. She let him fill her world with warm breathe and his tender tongue. She surrendered to his hunger, a hunger only a male creature would feel. Her mind went to another realm, a realm of pure bliss and ecstasy. It was as though he injected her with a magical potion.

After their bodily union, Helmkin sat up. Lilith was still suckling his fingers.

"Worthy of our last night together?" Helmkin turned toward her.

Lilith opened her eyes and her body tensed up. "You are still going?" Her voice sounded angry.

"Of course, third full moon of the year remember? I wanted tonight to be special." Helmkin putted on his boots.

"I don't remember that! You know I don't like to think about that!" Lilith sounded upset.

"Oh my dearest, come closer."

"NO!!!"

"Sweetest, we talked about this..." Helmkin stood beside her.

"A life that is yours; We don't live forever; A man's mission in life; Is that what YOU talked about?" Lilith's face looked redder than a sintering coal. "I talked about family, little ones, a chicken coop and a goat farm. But they fell on deaf ears as usual."

Helmkin had nothing to say.

"You got what you wanted and now you want to leave! Why can't you just say it!" Lilith cried in earnest.

Helmkin grabbed Lilith by her slender shoulders. He hugged her so tightly she was suffocating, but she dose not resist. She would rather suffocate with him than breath all the air in the world without him. She knew she will always be his love slave. She digs her nail into his back so she can hurt him. This way, he would be reminded of her body and her pain.

"Lilith, you always say happiness never lasts. I do not agree. Look at us. We are happy at this moment. Let us savour this moment. Let it be carved into our memories." Helmkin caressed Lilith's hair as he talked. "Years later, when we are old and grey. When I hold you in my arms again we will think back on this moment. We would close our eyes and be back in time, at this place, with these feelings. Everything that happens between this moment and that moment would not have mattered the least. The entire world disappears. Time is meaningless. The two instances connect as we stand on eternity."

Lilith melts. His words always does that to her. She draws a small circle with her finger tips around where her nail dug into his skin. "Then remember this. Remember the small circles that I am drawing on your back. Wherever and whenever we meet again I will draw them again so you would remember this moments. No matter how long, you must remember our special code."

Helmkin promised Lilith and they kissed. He wept and she wiped his tears away with her purple lilac handkerchief.