Chapter 7: The Longest Road Home

By Tomas Rodriguez

The tip of the wand cast a shine in the writer’s eye that would not let him concentrate on the 6th chapter of his novel that lay trapped in his mind as opposed to the pages of the notebook before him. The way it captured the light transfixed the poor writer to the point that he-

“Hey, is your turn over yet?” the wand’s owner asked, a greying wizard who, along with the writer, had begun their journey through the desert three days ago in Riverend. It had been the wizard who had suggested a pilgrimage to Folcrest.

Because of this, the writer had to endure three terrible nights of Cold and sand.   
“Have I ever told you”, the writer asked, “how gaudy your wand is?”

“It’s too large, I admit,” the wizard said, putting down the cards he had in his hand to his bony, withered fingers along a large heft of wood engraved with the crisscross of various runes intelligible only to himself. “It feels somewhat less of a wand and more of a small club”. Atop was engraved a sapphire the size of a man’s fist which, as rumor had it, was either the transfigured heart of a former lover that the wizard could never let go, or a cage for the souls extracted during gruesome and unholy experiments, depending on which side of the Perthian river you preferred your tale tales from.

“Come on, let’s get back to the game” said the camel merchant. She had been waiting patiently for the conversation to end, but the sound of Cold outside seemed to be drawing salty water from her scalp.

The writer caressed the wand with the hand that wasn’t holding the game’s cards. “What’s wrong, you don’t like the wand?”

“What of? Even if it were a proper wand, your precious Lord Charlatan couldn’t make so much as a breeze. Now, is your turn over or not?”

“I am no charlatan!” the wizard cried, standing up with fire in his cheeks. Outside, Cold cried the sound of thunder, and the tent began to shake at the grasp of his hands.

“Can you summon a horse?” Outside, the final horse to have survived trading season was lying down, dreaming of sunlit fields of grass and fresh water with no camels in sight. The camels, similarly, were thinking of days with no horse drinking *their* water. One of the camels could be heard protesting Cold’s molestation, but the camel merchant did not stir.

“I…”The wizard gazed up and down his wand, and sat back down. “I cannot.” His age began to settle on his face.

The writer sensed an opening. “Can you call upon rain?”

The wizard covered his face with the cards of the game. “I’d, well, I’d prefer not to you know. Cold is terrible enough without allies.”

“Can you whisk us from this terrible sand and that wretched Cold into the arms of a nearby city?” the camel merchant pleaded.

The wizard began to stand again, brushing some sand off of his shoulders and out of his fine grey beard. “The proper use of magic is not to summon your desires or to abet or evade the terrifying love that Nature has given birth to.”

“What is the proper use of magic then?” the writer asked, kissing his notebook with his finest pen as though the two were wedded.

“Why but of course.” The Wizard held up his wand with both hands, and whispered words so ancient only Cold would know their meaning. Slowly, the shadows the evening fire had cast upon the wall began to take lives independent of their creators, moving as though a will greater than nature guided them. Their new master, the wizard, began, “For centuries of centuries , man was caught in a cycle of bestial roaming that left them with no nation and no laws and no stories. Then the first wizard discovered the great secret that started it all. Can you guess what it was?”

The camel merchant was beginning to become enchanted by the festivities. “The horse! He learned to tame the horse! And with that, he could travel throughout the land…”

“No, my dear, even in our bestial days we had such creatures tethered to our control. Yet when our ancestors met as brothers and sisters, not a word would be passed beneath them that was not the savage details of the days hunt or the blighted gray of the day’s sky.”

“The written word then. “ The writer felt smug about it. ”Without it he could not remember his spells or pass them down. “

“Wrong again. Words would come later, after we lived in one place long enough to make them. But first we needed stories to save.

“And where did those come from?”

One by one the shadows seemed to leap into the firepit the three were using to warm themselves, dancing their way into a shadowy ‘death’. Slowly, the flame itself began to dance until the last shadow made it’s plunge, at which point a giant ball of fire separated itself from the rest of the flame. The fireball danced from one spectator to the next, letting the warmth reach the face of each member of the gathering before launching itself outside of the tent. There, Cold let in a loud hssssssssss.

“It was with fire that we learned to first tame Cold, and fire that allowed us to stay where we once roamed. And when men began to do battle with men, it was with fire that we unleashed our fury, and fire that one the day. And as nations grew, so to did our fires, up until the last generation of great sorcerer’s discovered what you have seen before you, the epitome of mankind’s control over the elements often called ‘the Grandmaster’s Flash’”

“Named for your flash of brilliance in making it?” the writer said.

“No, the flash of life before your eyes before burning yourself with it” the camel merchant wanted in.

“Ah, the waste of youth upon the ignorant. Speaking of which, whose move is it?” The wizard took his seat back at the game and began considering the board that had gathered the sands of neglect.

“We’re still playing? It’s been your move the entire time.” the writer said. He had to scramble to find his hand of cards, finally discovering he had sat on them at least an hour ago.

“Ah” the wizard said, reaching for his cards. Looking at the writer, he asked “Would you like some brick?”

“Why?”

“Well, I want to help add to your endless road over there”

“He already has the longest road, let him off” the camel merchant said while looking over her own road, which had long since been boxed in by both of her opponents.

“It’s his choice. Do you want to let your road end here?”

“I suppose it could go on a little further. Would you like two Wheat?” the writer asked?

“Why, he looks more old than hungry to me” The camel merchant was satisfied with herself.

“Very true, but your camels could use some” said the wizard.

The camel merchant made sharp eyes as the writer and wizard made their exchange. The wizard then made the roll for his turn, and up came a pair of snake eyes. He then moved the Robber onto the camel merchant’s only City. The silence was punctuated by the staccato of laughter from Cold.

“Hey, why do you only steal from her?” the writer asked.

“She monopolizes the sheep” replied the wizard.

“What about outside of the game”. The camel merchant was interested.

“Well, you monopolize all the camels” replied the wizard.

“I’m not talking about the camels” said the camel merchant.

“One occurrence does not make me a habitual thief of your property”

“She was Talderan stock, which is worth more than a wizard will know in five lifetimes. And she could have started an entire new herd.”

“And whose fault was her loss?” the wizard went on.

“You took her to save some stupid city from an oncoming dragon.”

“Neither I, the dragon, or the citizens of Folcrest, made my wand ten sizes too large to channel the chaotic and deadly energies needed for the creation of a portal. Who took my tool of magic, specifically to be maintained at a set size, and stretched it by means that are so base that I will not repeat them here, to prod her only horse to the point where she might give issue.”

“You said all she need was a larger stick!”

“That’s a metaphor.”

“Oh. What’s that?”

The writer brought his hand slowly to his face, which was failing to hold back his laughter. Cold heartily agreed.

*Castles. Stone and Cold nestled together in a bed of conservatism. A thousand curses on their creator, and the creators of this game, that they found the wretched structures worthy of praise and made it the desire of each player to collect them as one would pearls on a chain. Castles are just solid enough to feel real and imposing enough to feel powerful, but there is no danger , no change. They wait in silence, gazing at your entrance but never acknowledging it. Not like a road at all.*

*A little girl walks in castle. “My, what a big castle”, she says.*

*She then goes in. “ Look at all this stone, and this armor, and this chair…”*

*She is captivated, and she sleeps the next week away exploring.*

*Twenty years later, our little girl is a woman now. One again, she walks in our castle.*

*“Oh my, it’s the castle I was in as a little girl. Look, it’s the chair I sat in the first night, right there” And she is able to review her childhood in all of an hour.*

*Her childhood in the castle, at least. On the road is a different matter entirely.*

*When she came to the castle the first time, she found a little stone with a band of reeds wrapped around it.*

*“Hey, what are you here?”*

*The unwrapped edge of the reeds swayed in the wind, as if in response.*

*“Can I keep you then?”*

*Satisfied with whatever she found in the swaying of the reeds, she put it in her pocket and took it with her on her journey to the castle.*

*On her way home from her second visit, again an adult now I remind you, she met her husband who was waiting for her. Or atleast, should have been waiting for her.*

*In his place was a rock with reeds wrapped around it.*

*Do you see it yet? A road is changed even when it never changes. The comings and goings of passer by cannot be substituted by grandure and oppulance. Roads take you somewhere else, somewhere new, somewhere exciting. Every road laid down is a new collection of infinite travels to be taken upon it. What is a castle to such possibility?*

*Trapped in a castle. That’s how I found the wizard who now abuses the board with the wretched things. He was in his own mind, concerned with building the brightest chandeliers and getting the best paintintgs, so that if our little girl had gone into HIS castle she would worship him. “Yes lord wizard, I love you lord wizard. You’re so brave and safe.” I bet those were the words that camel merchant said when she first met him. I had not been there then, I was still on my own road. They just happened to find my path later.*

*That path is not quite chronicled in the preceding six chapters of course, but does it really matter whether I single handedly defeated the Haggis-witch at the end of time? Of course not. The Siege of Folcrest was too real, however, and I do not the least bit terrible of spoiling the ending – everybody dies. That’s how you ended up with this novel, after all.*

*As this was a pilgrimage to a holy city, it should not surprise you that I wish all my belongings that you find, save my wallet, for which you may help yourself as payment, should be remitted to the Temple of the Gods in Folcrest. It is they who gave me the words I have put on this page, both now, then, and hereafter, and so as they have served me in life I shall serve them in the afterlife.*

*While you may keep the original manuscript for yourself, dear reader, I do request that a copy of the manuscript be made available to my estate, that they be allowed to provide for themselves upon its publication. My absence has done them a grievous injury and I do hope that those who would take up my path be wary that there is no glory, only a story, in taking the longest road home.*

“And that concludes the final game of the final night on our pilgrimage” the wizard declared, victory finally his.

“Thanks be to our kind host for bringing us this kingly game” the writer said.

“It was better than telling tales each day like our last pilgrimage. How many crass re-workings of courtly love have you imagined since?” The camel merchant said. Memories from those initial experiments still troubled her nightly sleep.

“No amount of magic”, intoned the wizard” can separate a man from his loins. Or a woman from hers.”

“I hear you have a way of doing it with horses though” the writer jibed, handing the camel merchant the last piece of her game.

“Well, do you have a way of finishing novels yet?” the camel merchant said, pointing to the writer’s precious notebook.

“I’ll have you know I only have one chapter left!” The writer smiled as he said this, battle scars clearly visible as he allowed his relief to show through.

“Well, can I read what you have?”

“At the proper conclusion of the pilgrimage, when it is all finished!”

“Do you expected the finale to be delivered to you from on high?” the wizard said.

“Of course not, it’ll come down on a crane” the camel merchant said.

“Ah yes, in the hands of a wise councilor of the heavens ( who looks not unlike myself) with white, glowing robes and a magnificent speech. And with his words all shall foul ends shall spontaneously resolve themselves.”

“Whether by divine providence or mortal hand, a chapter is just a chapter” said the writer. “I am so close to ending I might as well be finished.”

“Oh, but a chapter in someone’s life is not a mere footnote,” said the wizard. “It can be the difference between a king and a commoner.”

“Do you miss it?” the writer asked?

“My life before fleeing my home?” the wizard said, a soft glaze overcoming his eyes along with the past.

“Yes.”

“Not as much as you would imagine.”

“You miss the city, I bet” the camel merchant piped in.

“Were it not for the temples I would not care to step in one to the end of my days”

“But the life and sounds of the city cannot be matched by Cold and his shifting sands.”

“The unfettered masses screaming till my ears bleed a new river? No, I would have Cold for company long before that again.”

“But all the new things happen in the city. Here it’s just…camels.”

“Fresh paint on a rotting chair should not lead you to sit on it.”

“Who is talking about a chair?”

“Actually, when you were still Lord Chamberlain, did you actually give orders from a throne?” Slowly , even before the question was asked, the writer’s hand, and pen, began to move from one side of the notebook to the other.

“No, the throne is the showpiece for fools, both those who feel empowered and those who feel empowered over. The only orders I could give were the night’s dinner, and only on the anniversary of my coronation.”

“Then who rules?” The hand continued its work.

“Councilors. Generals. Even my brother Antonio while I was taking up Liberal Arts. Anyone who wanted to could come and interpret my words in any way they chose. I would try to change my words as best I could, but once it left my inner circle it was no longer my own, and I could only watch as the people reacted.”

“And you needed a break.”

“More, I needed an ending.”

“ So, what did you do?”

“Did it involve your Grandmaster’s Flash?”

“Yes, my bedroom to this day supposedly contains the charred up remains of my poor self. I believe they turned the whole wing of the castle into my tomb.”

“And so ends the tale of a king in name only. “

Outside, Cold finally fell asleep.

“It’s not just an ending” said the writer. “It’s a new beginning.”

His hand stopped. A new chapter awaits.